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Case 07: The Portrait of a Lily

I have few memories of my childhood.

No, that statement is bound to give birth to misunderstandings. Let me rephrase, my memories of childhood -- they're filled with problems surrounding a certain light -- perhaps that would be a better way to put it.

I later found out that the light was called a Biophoton. In the world, it's called an aura or a ring of light, the halo that's often depicted in Buddhist paintings. And I was able to see that light since childhood. It always shone alongside the outlines of a person.

Bright lights, Dim lights.

Swaying lights, Blurred lights.

Within them were red, white, blue, purple, and countless other colors; Since I was little, I think I distinguished people by the colors that entwined them, rather than their faces, their clothes or their height. My mother was this color, my friend Chi-chan from kindergarten was this color, this color belonged to the man from the grocery store, that color belonged to the neighborhood kid who would bully me, and so on. I used to think that everyone was like that, and my carefree feelings led me to think that their colors were beautiful, but it wasn't until I was in the first grade of elementary school that I realized that I was the only one who identified people by their colors. I stupidly ended up talking about those lights to my classmate, and they shouted, "Shiina-chan, you're so creepy!" I got so startled that I stopped talking about it after that.

I asked my parents for advice, and they took me to an ophthalmologist. However, no abnormalities were detected in my

eyes. I could see inorganic things with ease. But all living things were accompanied by some kind of light. In junior high school, the aura ended up becoming more and more prominent, and I suffered like a neurotic. I saw a psychiatrist as well, and had a neurosurgical examination. None of the results were abnormal, and none of the doctors could understand my suffering. From that time on, I gradually began to distance myself from my friends, becoming a girl who read books alone in the corner of the classroom. In this world full of light, books alone were my silent companions. They were able to give my heart peace and calmness. Perhaps it was because I continued to read in the dark, which had become such a stronghold of my heart, that my eyesight began to deteriorate. It got to the point where I couldn't even see the words on the chalkboard unless I wore glasses, and I thought that if I did that, I might not have to suffer from the auras of people that only I could see. I didn't want to wear glasses, but I still hoped that my eyesight would just about disappear.

And yet -- it seemed to have no direct relation to how good or bad my eyesight was. As usual, people were glowing, and the degree of glow was different for everyone. On the contrary, as my eyesight diminished, the colors of people's auras which had only been several were now so strong that I could distinguish dozens of different colors.

When I entered high school, I felt that power was at its peak.

Once, while I was commuting to school in the train, I was so overwhelmed by the light emitted from those around me that I lost consciousness. When I regained my senses, I was lying on a train seat, being cared for by many people. Many people had given up their seats for me during the overcrowded rush hour. I felt ashamed about that, and I also felt unbearably scared and resentful of my unexplained nature. There were many times when I thought that I would be better off destroying my own eyes.

And then, on a certain day --

"You can see them, can't you?"

That voice suddenly called out to me as I entered the school gates. I turned around to see a person clad in a gold-colored aura standing

there.

No -- that dazzling glitter was different from gold. That light was mixed with a somewhat dull, purple color. I could also see something that resembled black smoke. I strained my eyes, desperately searching for the source of that person's light, their real body. That person was clad in the same black blazer uniform as me. A tall, slender female with an exceedingly beautiful face. Her eyebrows were arched in the shape of a crescent moon, and her eyes underneath were thin and long, full of affection. The bridge of her nose stretched out nicely like that of a foreigner, and her lips drew an alluring curve that even I, a woman, was shocked to see.

"Sorry for being so sudden. But I felt like I had to say it out loud. The lights you see -- they're called Biophotons, and all living beings have them. It's not really abnormal or anything."

"...Huh?"

"I should introduce myself first."

She smiled gently and held out her hand.

"Ayana Takamura. Third-year student."

I unconsciously squeezed her hand in return -- and was surprised at how cold it was.

Her hand itself was very soft, but I couldn't feel any warmth in it, as if it wasn't even alive.

"I can see them too."

".....Huh?"

"Come and visit me whenever you like. I'm usually in the literature club or student council after school."

I later found out that she was the current student council president, and head of the literature club. From what I heard in class, Ayana-san was very famous. Or rather, my classmates were surprised at me instead: 'You didn't know about Takamura-san?' Was their response.

Regardless of gender, everyone became overzealous when talking about Takamura-san, as if they were fighting to be the first to talk about her. Her family apparently had a very long history, and that she was said to be descended from nobility. Excelling in both school and sports, she was a school record holder in track and field, yet despite that, she focused on her student council duties and the literature club. She's been elected as student council president for two years in a row, and in studies, she's ranked between first and third in her grade since she entered school. She's kind and friendly to everyone, and has the ability to handle the so-called "dirty talk" with the boys. Since her freshman year of high school, she seems to have received countless love confessions from seniors and boys of her grade, but has no romantic stories involving her, she's also popular among the girls as well. Why didn't I know about a super high school student like Takamura-san up until now? I wondered that to the point where I felt ashamed of myself.

I imagined a lily in full bloom on a hill where only dandelions grew carefree. As if this entire world had only her on it, Senpai[1] stood alone and indifferent.

Even though she told me I could visit her whenever I liked, there was no way someone like me could readily visit such a great person. It had been about a week since I first met Takamura-san, and my high school life continued as usual. Yet still, with Takamura-san's words in mind -- "You are not abnormal" -- they helped me keep calm through the days.

"Hey there, Kurimoto-san."

One day, as I walked out the gates to leave school, I was called out again.

In front of my eyes was a complex golden-colored person --- Ayana Takamura was waving at me.

"T--Takamura-san."

"Good afternoon. Are you doing well?"

For a girl, Takamura-san was really tall. Probably around 170 cm.

As a short girl, I was overwhelmed by her gaze as she looked down at me.

"Hahaha, yes. I'm fine."

I replied awkwardly, when I suddenly realized.

How did she know my name? The other day, I was so stunned by everything that happened that I couldn't even introduce myself properly.

Ayana-san proceeded to smile pleasantly and spoke as if she read my mind:

"I remembered your class badge and came to visit during lunch break. You weren't in class at the time, so I asked about the girl with the red glasses -- one of the kids in your class told me: 'That must be Kurimoto-san'."

---Did that kind of thing happen?

For some reason, my face turned deep red, and I apologized.

"I'm really sorry. I usually eat lunch on a bench out in the courtyard -- after that I'm usually in the library reading."

"It's not something you have to apologize for. I see – The library, is it? Do you like books?"

"Y-yes."

"I wonder what kind of books you read. If you can, how about we visit the literature club right now?"

"...Huh?"

"Let's have a cup of tea. I wanted to have a talk with you. Are you free?"

She smiled gently at me, and without thinking, I vigorously nodded.

The literature club room was on the second floor of the prefabricated club room building at the north end of the high school.

"Well, come in."

Takamura-san took a key out from her pocket and opened the door, invited me inside.

The interior was a neat and tidily arranged room about 16 sqm in size.

There were three bookshelves, and a four-seat desk in the middle. In the corner of the room was an electric kettle and a few cute-looking cups placed upside down. But anyway, I think I felt quite excited at that time.

"Please, have a seat anywhere you'd like."

'Y-y-yes', I replied as I hurriedly placed my bag down on one of the chairs, and sat down on the next chair, looking around in circles.

Takamura's scent softly drifted in the air, and it truly felt like this place was Takamura-san's castle.

I'd never used perfume before, but that alone made me feel as if I'd stepped into an adult space, as if I was softly floating in midair. While Takamura-san was making tea, I finally managed to calm down a little and carefully examined the club room.

The bookshelves were crammed with pocket paperbacks.

There were authors I knew, and names I'd never heard of before. There were books I'd always wanted to read, and whenever I'd find one of my favorite titles, I'd feel a little happy. All the bookshelves had a large shelf at the bottom, where the club magazines published by the literature club were neatly arranged. After I'd finished glancing over the shelf, I looked around again. The windows were tied with pretty and serene curtains, and on the wall were several posters by artists I didn't know.

And when I saw one of the posters--

I felt a chill, as small goosebumps creeped up on me. In the clean and mature atmosphere of the club room, the design of the poster alone seemed somewhat bizarre. In the picture, a white cloth was draped on a chair, and on top of the cloth, was a woman's head. You could call it creepy, but in the warm atmosphere of this room, that alone seemed to vividly stand out.[2]

While I pondered over such things--

"Sorry, I'm afraid I can only offer black tea."

Takamura-san placed a steaming white cup in front of me.

"N-not at all. It's fine. Thank you."

I gently take the cup in my hands, then--

"Are you curious about that poster?"

Takamura-san smiled as she grasped her cup with both hands.

"Eh, no...."

"That was made by Beksiński. Zdzisław Beksiński. A Polish painter, photographer and artist who was also passionate about computer graphics in his later years. I love his work."

"I-Is that so?"

Gently sipping the tea from her cup and nodding, Takamura-san continued happily:

"What is art? There are so many self-proclaimed artists in the world, but sometimes, I get the feeling that real artists don't exist anywhere. And I feel that the title of 'artist' should never be used to describe oneself. When your work comforts others, isn't that when you truly become an artist to someone?"

I was somewhat spellbound by Takamura-san's expression as she spun her words in an elegant manner. I didn't know what made a painting

good or bad, but for the first time I was surprised to see a student who seriously contemplated the interpretation of paintings and art, like how an art teacher would.

"However, this much is true."

Thereupon, she unexpectedly lowered her voice:

"The depth of one's art is proportional to the depth of one's sorrow."

"...Huh?"

"They say that people act to fill in the void in their lives, but -- Bekcinski was unhappy, so his work is imbued with a special kind of emotion."

"Is it sorrow?"

I asked in reply, and Takamura-san nodded her head.

"That's right, this person's life was a series of despairs. In his youth, he bore witness to the Nazi invasion, and in his adult years, he experienced Poland's turbulent political period. Yet he continued to draw despite all that, and at last, when his paintings were finally recognized, he lost his beloved wife. Furthermore, in the year that followed, his dearest son committed suicide. And finally, two days before his birthday, he was stabbed to death seventeen times by the son of his lifelong friend."

"....."

"Even after death, his sorrow didn't end. Fifty-nine of his works were bought by a Japanese man, who then disappeared. The location of those works is currently unknown. They've disappeared into the darkness of this world, without even being able to be experienced through the eyes of people."

In spite of the weather being quite warm—

I felt a faint chill, and Takamura-san finally spoke in a whisper:

"Maybe that's why… it's been said that if you see this painting three

times, you will die.”

That moment, I felt the head in the picture turn towards me –

I felt a chill up my spine.

The eyes of the woman on the chair slowly turned towards me.

I couldn’t bear to keep staring at the picture any longer, suddenly averting my gaze, I noticed –

Senpai was staring my face.

Those eyes -- were empty, and there was a light in them that seemed to be devouring everything in sight, as if to fill that emptiness with something.

Startled, I clasped my hand in front of my chest.

“—Just kidding.”

Senpai suddenly smiled.

“It was just a joke.”

“…Huh?”

“I see it every day, but as you can see, I’m still alive. Sorry for teasing you.”

Takamura-senpai laughed with amusement, and at the same time, I let out a deep sigh of relief.

I secretly examined her expression once again, but her eyes had already returned to their usual shine.

She merely stared at the poster, pressed the cup against her well-shaped lips, and smiled.

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I became a member of the literature club soon after that.

I liked books, and I was relieved to be close to someone who understood my unique condition of being able to see people's auras, but most of all, it was because I was charmed by the third-year student --- Ayana Takamura-san. She was someone who always gave me peace of mind. When I was confused about my future career path, she immediately replied: "Do what you love."

"The thing that people love to do – Yes… the thing that they work on so hard that they forget to eat --- that is certainly the talent granted to them by heaven."

Takamura-san often referred to the word 'talent' as 'gift'.

I learned that in English-speaking countries, the word 'gift' took the meaning of 'being granted something by heaven'.

"So, in a way - being able to see people's auras is also a gift of yours."

She smiled at me.

"So, Kurimoto-san, what do you want to do in the future?"

"…Errr..uuhh…"

I hastily gathered the thoughts in my head.

"Well, I-I'd like to understand the things that I can see. Is it a sight-based phenomenon? A psychological phenomenon? Or some kind of cerebral phenomenon? I'm not sure, but at any rate, in the future I'd like to study in a place where I can specialize in such things."

"That's good. I'll be cheering you on."

Takamura-san smiled and patted me on the shoulder to encourage me.

After that, my life as a student changed completely.

I was still a bookworm, but I wasn't just reading novels, I started

reading a wide range of books – books on Psychology, Cognitive science, Auras in terms of the occult, and Ethnology. As my knowledge broadened, so did my interest in people. In myself, and in others. With that, I came to recognize that just as I was myself, other people were a group who established their own individuality. After all this time, I finally realized that everyone carried their own individual hardships, joys, and values. Perhaps it was because I was able to think like this that I started to talk to my classmates, whom I had been casually avoiding, and I think I became a little more active. I could still see people's auras, but I was less likely to panic when I saw them. Of course, it was still scary, but not as scary as it had been.

"Say, Kurimoto-san."

After school, I was organizing past club magazines in the literature club room when I was approached by Takamura-san, who was sorting through the shelves.

"Yes?"

"What do you think about this?"

Takamura-san held out her cellphone.

"Are you asking me about the cellphone's design?"

"No, no. This message."

Takamura-san laughed as she brought her cellphone close to my ear.

I heard something like a static buzzing sound, and a small bubbly sound you'd hear from an air pump in a fish tank.

"The reception is quite bad, isn't it?" I answered, 'Is that all?' Takamura-san looked at me with amusement.

"You didn't notice anything at all?"

While saying this, Takamura-san operated the cell phone and handed it to me again.

She seemed to set it up so that I could listen to it again from the beginning.

I pressed the receiver to my ears once again, and concentrated on listening to the sound in its entirety.

The bubbly sound and the electric buzzing sound. That really was all I could hear. I was about to say that out loud --- when I noticed. Beyond the noise, there was another sound; something else.

"…Huh?"

It was… a person's voice. A slow, muttering voice, like a slow spinning record. A man's voice. I couldn't make out what he was saying, but it's definitely someone talking about something—

The moment I realized that, I got startled.

Before I had realized, the interior of the room had grown dark.

No -- from my eyes, from my brain, the blood was rapidly draining away.

This wasn't good. This was – I'd experienced it before. It was similar to the anemia that happened when I was exposed to the auras of too many people. I might lose consciousness at this rate. Fearing that, I tried to move my ear away from the cellphone.

But --- my fingers couldn't move. The cellphone stayed clung to my ear just like that. Was this the 'paralysis' that people often spoke of? Everything in my body stopped moving as if rejecting its owner's command. All I could do was remain still as the man's muffled words poured into my ear. The sound of bubbles, which was supposed to be coming from only one ear, was now coming from both ears, making me feel as if I were submerged in the deep sea, and I felt suffocated. No, in fact, I became unable to breathe.

"Ku…Gu….Guwaaa."

In tears, I reached out for help.

Towards my senpai who had saved me from the suffering of seeing auras ---- Towards Ayana Takamura-san.

However—

Senpai stood there – she looked at me with the same empty eyes I had seen once before. Ayana Takamura-san's expression was cold, and she gazed at me as if… as if she were devouring me, me who was unable to breathe, shedding tears and asking for help. I felt something resembling a fierce appetite in those wide, open eyes. She stared at me in silence, as if to burn the image in her memory: The moment of me being swallowed up by a muddy stream, and drowning to death.

"S…Senpai…!"

Even so, as I desperately reached out to her with tears in my eyes –

Finally, Senpai reached out to me.

She brought her hand in front of mine, and slapped it with great force.

The sound made the air vibrate sharply, and tore up something. In an instant, my body became able to move. I moved my ears away from the cell phone, and collapsed on the floor, desperately trying to catch my breath.

"Sorry, sorry. You alright?"

Saying that, Takamura-san gently massaged my back.

My breathing slowly returned to normal, and the scenery regained its brightness and color.

However, I had no clue as to what had just taken place.

"I guess this was too soon." Senpai said and smiled quietly.

I would learn much later, that it was not a wrong number or

something like that –

Takamura-san had gone to a place in Okutama where suicides occurred frequently, and simply recorded the sound there.

“They… exist everywhere.”

“I have no idea where they come from.”

“And they're very sensitive to the fact that they're being watched."

After a while, when things finally calmed down, Senpai spoke those words.

“Senpai, what are ‘they’?” I asked.

“Ghosts.” Takamura-senpai simply replied.

“I’ve been able to see them since I was a child.”

“G-Ghosts?”

-- Ghosts -- you mean the ones under the willow trees? [3] Or the ones that have a grudge with their hands pointing downwards…… that kind of thing?

Senpai smiled in reply, ‘I think it’s a little different’.

“Not all of them have eyes, hands, or a human shape. Some of them are mere white shadows, and some of them are just sounds. However, I believe they were all originally the same thing. They are thoughts, fragments, and residues of what was once a person. And what's more, the biophotons you see. I think that’s them too.”

“H…huh? Huh? B-but Senpai. The things I see are just lights and--”

Senpai then put her long fingers to her chin and nodded.

“Listen carefully, Kurimoto-kun. The world is truly multi-faceted. What appears square-shaped to one might appear a sphere to another looking from another angle. In short, what you perceive as mere lights, look distinctly human in shape to me.”

“…”

“Well, for convenience’s sake, I call them ghosts -- but I'm not sure how to formally define them. However, it’s perfectly commonplace for them to be everywhere. I wish I could introduce them to you, but they are timid in their own way, and I don't really know what they are thinking.”

Ayana Takamura-senpai smiled, poured hot water into a cup, and handed it to me.

“Drink this, and then take slow, deep breaths. Put some strength in your stomach. Don’t worry, the living are much stronger than the dead. As long as we stay strong, they can’t interfere with us.”

I was abruptly being bombarded with such unbelievable things one after the other, but one thing became clear to me in my confused mind.

The reason why Senpai’s existence stood out among the other students.

The reason why she alone had a detached atmosphere about her, as if she was looking down on the world.

It was because the high school girl known as Ayana Takamura stood face to face with the world beyond.

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“There are things that come out of the living, things that have been scraped off and float around. Most of them vanish with the disappearance of the body, but there are a few that wander around in this world even after the body’s disappearance. You may not be

aware of it, but the lights you see probably contain things that are no longer alive. And they're very sensitive to being seen, to being perceived. In other words, it's as if you're walking alone in the endless darkness with a seven-colored electronic billboard on your back."

On a certain day, Takamura-senpai talked to me and handed me a piece of paper with something strange written on it.

"This will keep them away, it's what you'd call a good luck charm."

"…A good luck charm?"

"That's right. I knew it since the first time I saw you. You were just like me, wandering in the same dark abyss I'd been suffering in. Topics concerning ghost phenomenon are mostly avoided in this country. There's a tendency to dismiss the occult as mere fairy tales, and it's difficult to even research it. But without a doubt, they are everywhere. They're always there, watching us in silence. With a keen eye, they look for those who might perceive them, and they cling to them."

I gulped at those words.

"Go on, then. Chant these words. And recite them every morning and night, and whenever you get a bad feeling."

"…Y, yes."

I nodded, and chanted those words out loud without knowing their meaning.

Written in Hiragana[4], those words were easy to remember. They had a unique rhyme to them that made them audibly memorable. Repeating them just a few times was enough to soak them deep into my brain. They seemed to quickly melt into my bloodstream and run through my body.

However --- I think it was after that.

Strange things seemed to start happening around me.

In the morning, when I was brushing my teeth in front of the mirror, I saw someone standing behind me in my reflection. It was a transparent figure with long hair who smiled faintly. When I was lying down with one knee up, I felt someone's hands on top of the knee. At night, when I was studying, a page of the dictionary which I hadn't touched lay open in front of me. During times like that, I'd be so scared that I would recite the 'good luck charm' Senpai had taught me. I'd close my eyes and repeat it in desperation, strongly believing that it would be enough for them to leave me alone. However, the frequency with which something was hanging around me was only increasing.

In the daytime, I saw a person standing on top of a telephone pole.

On the ceiling of the room, a large face appeared.

The train window reflected an empty carriage without any people.

When I rubbed my eyes and looked again, things were normal.

However, whenever they materialized, a strange sound remained ringing in my ear.

Being at a complete loss, I consulted Senpai about it, who reassured me:

"There's nothing to worry about. They had been clinging to you as they pleased up until now, so they're desperately trying not to be torn off."

"I-is that so?"

I believed those words.

With all my heart, I concentrated on chanting the good luck charm.

Eventually, my vision became darker and heavier, as if I were always wrapped by darkness. I became unable to tell the difference between yesterday and today, and time passed as I continued walking along an unending dark road.

But then --- on a certain day…

I noticed it during chemistry class in the lab.

The chemistry teacher, dressed in white, put an old ten-yen coin into the beaker, and poured in hydrochloric acid, a reducing agent and sodium chloride.

“Being soaked in these liquids, this ten-yen coin will be polished as a metal.”

The ten-yen coin immediately regained its original vivid and golden-looking color.

Holding that up in a happy way to the students, the look on the teacher’s face was just like Senpai’s when she was gazing at me. That look was very similar to the one Takamura-senpai sometimes showed. Somewhere In the depths of her vacant eyes, a glitter of ecstasy shone forth.

“Experiment.”

All of a sudden, that word flashed across my mind.

--Am I not the ten-yen coin in that beaker?

--Am I not the subject of some kind of experiment?

The moment I thought that, my body stopped moving. Just like when I was pinned down by Senpai’s gaze back then, I ended up becoming trapped in Senpai’s eyes who wasn’t even here. In the twinkle of an eye, I felt helplessly exposed as my individuality whittled away. But if it is some kind of experiment, what in the world is it about? What is Senpai trying to do by using me?

Holding my breath in, I thought about such things, when something suddenly appeared on the blackboard. An empty part of the blackboard with no writing on it became distorted into a murky, swirling vortex. The next thing I knew, the room had grown eerily dark, as my heartbeat quickened.

--I’m scared.

The inexplicable events that were happening around me were

unbearably scary. Am I at the bottom right now? Or does this hole go even deeper? It felt like I was wandering down a horribly misguided path. And something was staring coldly at me while I was curled up in fear. That empty gaze that seemed to snatch away all my trembling emotions, it filled me with fear.

--But even though it was unbearably scary.

At that time, I could neither run, nor could I turn away. It was because somewhere in that gaze, I sensed the urgency of a baby crawling towards me. The urgency of an infant desperately reaching out for its mother –

--Is what I thought, at the time.

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During the early days of summer, Senpai remained absent for a few days from school.

From what I heard, her father had passed away. She was the most famous student in the school, so that sad news spread rapidly in all the grades. At that time, that news was treated as a sad matter worthy of everyone's sympathy. When Senpai did return to school after a few days, there was a swarm of students who were worried about her as if it was their own personal affair. Senpai acted as cheerful as she could towards everyone, which helped her garner even more sympathy. However, not long afterwards, news spread of her private tutor passing away. One month afterwards, Senpai's homeroom teacher committed suicide. As autumn arrived, I heard a rumor that a third-year boy who had been persistently trying to pursue a relationship with Senpai, jumped off the school roof.

I think that was around the time…

--Many people close to Takamura-senpai have died.

Such a rumor began to be whispered in secret. Of course, it was about Senpai -- the super high school student. There were still many who sympathized with her, and it was a small-scale rumor, so it took a long time for it to reach my ears, since I didn't have a wide circle of friends.

And then, on a certain day—

"Shiina-chan, can I talk to you for a moment?"

After school had ended, Kotoka Suzumoto-san, the girl I got along with the most in class, came to talk to me. I followed her to the back of the school building, where she uncomfortably began to speak.

"Say, did you hear the rumor about our senpai in second-year, Nakajō-san?"

"Nakajō-san? No."

I shook my head, and Suzumoto-san bit her lip in response.

She remained silent for a while, before finally making up her mind to speak.

"Shiina-chan is a member of the literature club, right? Makoto Nakajō-san was also a member for two years."

"Was…? Ah-it's just me and Takamura-san right now, so I guess that person quit the club?"

"No, It's something I heard from my senpai in the Brass band club, but apparently… she stopped coming to school. I don't want to make a big fuss about it – but she's not in a normal state."

"…Eh?"

"She only wears white clothes, shuts herself inside her own room, has talismans posted all over the walls, windows and the door. At any rate, she spends all day cowering in fear. She yells, 'It's over there, I can see it."

Those words made something cold crawl on my back.

“Why would she -- Nakajō-san, was it? Why would she end up like that?”

“Well….”

Suzumoto-san hesitantly looked down and mumbled.

However, I somehow already knew what Suzumoto-san was trying to say.”

“Um… I heard a rumor saying it was Senpai’s fault.”

Suzumoto-san eventually said it out loud, causing my body to tremble.

“That’s why, I got worried about you, Shiina-chan. Takamura-san is a great and wonderful person – but, are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

I smiled and said that – but…

Even after I parted ways with Suzumoto-san, I couldn’t get rid of the chill that lingered in my heart.

According to her story, only special students were allowed in the literature club. The only students who could join the literature club required special permission from Ayana Takamura, who had absolute influence over the school. Come to think of it, I did find it strange. Takamura-san was so popular, yet why were the two of us the only members of the club? There should have been a lot more people willing to join. However, according to Suzumoto-san, that was because Takamura-san silently selected members on her own. Even if someone wanted to join the club, she would casually decline them during the interview as the club head. ‘This club is going to be dissolved soon’, or ‘You’re better suited to a sports club’, were the usual reasons given for declining. In that sense, the fact that I had joined the literature club was something special, and for a time, I was secretly the object of envy and jealousy in the classroom.

--What does it all mean?

I thought to myself.

Was it because I could see people's auras, like Takamura-san? Does that mean that my senpai known as Nakajō-san, who had stopped coming to school, could see them as well?

Takamura-senpai definitely has some strange aspects about her. Since I became a member of the literature club, I came to know of her extraordinary obsession with things not of this world. Her fascination and research into the existence of ghosts. She had a deep knowledge of the occult, both ancient and modern, and admired the works of Eliphas Levi in particular. But I thought that was just something that girls of this era liked. Or maybe that's what I was trying to believe. Perhaps it was the influence of having been saved by Senpai's words after I'd been suffering from seeing biophotons since childhood. I tried to believe that interest in things like fortune telling and spirituality, was particularly specialized in the case of Senpai who had exceptional thinking.

But my steps were heavy as I left Suzumoto-san and headed for the club room alone.

--I too, will soon end up like Makoto Nakajō-san, won't I?

Will I stop going to school, wear white clothes, and be frightened of something invisible?

--No.

The darkness in the presence that lies ahead spreads much further.

Now, I can feel the presence of what's known as death right by my side.

It was not a death that would happen from old age decades from now. Rather, it was a premonition of a sudden death arriving in mere weeks. But strangely enough, death itself was not so scary. If the world of the living is this world, and the world of the dead is the world beyond – then for the past few days, I can't say with certainty that my surroundings are this world. The boundary between the two

worlds is dissolving and collapsing, and I don't feel the life force in anything that makes up this world. In the midst of people's radiating light, I felt as if I alone had lost my light.

However, right now—

I didn't think it was such a bad thing.

All humans must die someday. Without exception, they will die. The question is, were you a person who could become someone needed by someone else while you were alive? I had begun to think such things without realizing –

In a panic, I looked around. My surroundings were full of bright, laughing and bustling students, I alone felt dark and dull.

I dragged my heavy steps to the club room; through the window, I saw the lights of the room were turned off. I had heard about the location of the duplicate key, and before I bent down to retrieve it, I tried pulled the door open. The door wasn't locked at all. I slowly opened the door, and a fragrant scent immediately drifted through the door, the moment I realized what it was --- I ran inside and closed the door.

In the dark club room, by the window-side, Senpai was sitting on a chair smoking a cigarette. With a vacant expression, a white ectoplasm-like smoke drifted from her lips. The sweet, thick scent made my head spin. But more so than that, it made me panic.

"S-senpai."

A vacant looking Takamura-san looked my way.

Her face looked pale, whiter and more transparent than usual.

"Hey."

"W-what are you doing?"

Senpai motionlessly stared out of the window in response.

I moved to ask once again, when –

“I’ve been thinking.” Muttered Ayana Takamura-san.

“About where… people go to.”

“…Huh?”

“From here on, where is the human species heading? Space? Another dimension? I think neither. From now on, humanity is headed towards a more inner world. But in a future where the individual world becomes shared and crowded, can individuality truly be established?”

“….”

“In a shrinking world, the idea of artificially creating a Mary – haha. The world is so twisted, isn't it? You don't even acknowledge the existence of ghosts, but you place more importance on the spiritual path than on humans. That's why things are going in unpredictable directions.”

I had no idea what was she saying. Anyways, I shut the window and spoke:

“Senpai, smoking will get you expelled. Doing something like that as the student council president is just…”

“…Right.”

“P-please put it out this instant.”

“I mean, it’s fine, isn’t it?”

Takamura-san smiled silently.

“It’s fine if I stop being the student council president, I don’t care for any more prestige. I don’t even want to give birth to a child – Ah, a flesh and blood child, that is.”

“I-I don’t know what you mean. Anyway, *cough* It’s so smoky in here, if a teacher comes—”

“...So that’s it, you might have a child in the future. Sorry about that.”

Despite apologizing, Senpai showed no signs of putting out her cigarette.

The cigarette between her long fingertips was stretched so far out that the ashes were about to drop down.

“Adults are such assholes.” Senpai eventually grumbled.

“If being an adult means having to compromise, then I don't want to be an adult at all.”

“…”

“Don’t cause trouble for people. Cut off small, irreplaceable things in order to conform to society. To do so, lie and justify your actions. No matter how correct an opinion might be, eliminate anything that threatens a stable society. Or pretend to never see it. Ignore it as if doesn’t even exist. Most people do not see the truth. However, the countless things that have been eliminated are still there, despite not being seen.”

“Are you…”

For some reason, the words naturally came out of my mouth.

“Are you talking about ghosts?”

In response, Takamura-san looked at me in surprise – and smiled silently.

“I see. Ghosts are that as well. That’s right, It’s about ghosts.”

She chuckled feebly; her large eyes narrowed as she muttered:

“Ah, I see. That's why ghosts will never disappear from this world. Because people unconsciously acknowledge the existence of what they've been trampling upon.”

Enshrouded in the sweet white scent, senpai smiled.

“I can see their suffering. That's why I don't want to belong to the side that tramples on them. If I could reduce it to just one perfectly clear thought, it would be this: This body is a hindrance. Humans only believe the things reflected in their eyes. It is in the body that all bonds reside. That is why, I don’t need something like a body. That’s why, I want to erase this body tied down by bonds before my soul is corrupted.”

The smile on her face was transparent, like a dream- - it was as if she herself were a ghost, and my legs began to tremble.

“Say, Kurimoto-san.” Senpai suddenly spoke.

“Let’s take a photo together, shall we?”

“…Huh?”

“I’ve always hated photos, and I haven’t had one taken one in a long time – but, it would be nice to share at least one memory with you.”

Saying this, she brazenly stubbed out her cigarette against the window sill at last, and stood up. She grabbed the polaroid camera used for covering news, and left the room. Flustered, I chased after her, coming out into the courtyard, she called and stopped one of the students nearby, and asked them to take our photo. We lined in front of some large zelkova trees. Senpai put her hand on my shoulder while I was still in a daze. Her hand was soft, and her scent was wonderful as she leaned in close to me.

--The scent of a lily.

An inexplicable sadness swelled up in my heart as I thought that. I don’t know where that emotion came from. However, my feelings towards Ayana-senpai – sometimes of admiration, sometimes of fear – and finally realizing that I liked her so much that I didn’t want her to leave. I recalled the lily in the language of flowers. It represented purity and innocence. This person could see everything people unconsciously overlooked – no, the things people had to overlook in order to keep living.

How painful must that have been?

How it must have made her want to scream out.

If a person had to take in the thoughts of all those around them in their mind, they wouldn't be able to keep their mind normal for even a single day. It must have been hell to be constantly exposed to the dark emotions that no one ever expresses. I could only imagine how painful it must have been for Senpai, who managed to cope with everyday life with her extraordinary mental strength and analytical skills. For a long time, I was troubled by the light that people gave off, and I wished that I could destroy my eyes -- but in my heart, I caught a glimpse of the path that Senpai had taken.

With a click, the shutter sounded—

Senpai thanked the student as she took the camera.

She took the printed picture from the polaroid camera which was still not fully developed, and looked up.

She squinted at the dazzling green trees of Koumei institute, and spoke:

"Someday, people will pay for what they've done."

Under the white, dazzling sunlight seeping through the trees, she whispered:

"The violent revenge of countless thoughts that have been trampled for the so-called greater good of civilization will happen before our eyes."

Those words were like an old forgotten prophecy. Like a melody that had leaked from the Akashic Records[5], something no person could overrule, had rung out into the world.

After that, Ayana Takamura-san turned to face me once more, and handed me the photograph in silence.

In it, were two high school girls.

In the sunlight seeping through the trees, the two of them smiled like some kind of miracle.

“This is my last order as the club head.” Senpai spoke to me while I was looking at the picture.

“From this moment on, forget about me.”

“…Huh?”

She seized me with her clear, gentle eyes, and spoke:

“Forget what I said, what I did to you, my face, my voice, my scent, everything. Forget it all, and don't come back here again.”

○

Soon afterwards… Senpai disappeared.

The sudden disappearance of the student council president: It caused a panic in the school, and a missing person report was immediately filed with the police. Every nook and cranny of the school was searched, and I think the whole town was abuzz with commotion for a while. It was probably related to the fact with the fact that Senpai’s deceased father was a famous businessman who had been donating a lot of money to the school. The school went to extraordinary lengths to try and find her. However, a month passed with no sign of Senpai’s whereabouts. There was a rumor saying she committed suicide, but I didn’t know what it was based on, and from having known Senpai up close, albeit for a short time, I didn’t believe it so easily. She definitely said she wanted to erase herself – but I couldn’t help but feel that the word ‘suicide’ didn’t fit Senpai. She had a strong grasp on everything from where she stood, and a strong will to accomplish her goals.

Most people, including myself, can only see what lies in front of us, what is right next to us, and our own footprints etched behind us. However, I felt that Senpai was always gazing alone at something that lay far beyond in the distance. She had a kind of solitude that was similar to enlightenment, as if she was looking down on everything alone from a position much higher up than the clouds or

the sky. For that reason, I felt that her actions would not be meaningless. The beauty of her actions would be noticed by many people only after viewing the record of her chess moves – is the image I had which was hard to erase. That was precisely why, no matter what, I couldn't believe the rumor of Senpai ending her own life.

However, even after two months had passed, Senpai still didn't appear anywhere.

And, as if becoming bound to Senpai's words, my feet receded from the club room.

I couldn't believe that Senpai was dead, but I also couldn't feel her presence in this world – It was hard to explain this strange feeling. It was as if she was right by my side, but I also felt that I would never meet her again. At any rate, I stopped chanting the 'good luck charm' that Senpai had taught me, and before I knew it, I was no longer seeing strange phenomena.

And it was probably around this time, when…

The auras of people which had tormented me so much, disappeared entirely from my sight. It was as if Senpai had taken away all my mysteries, and the world became inorganic. It was not something I could immediately get used to, since I was used to seeing auras since I was a child -- but gradually, I began to distinguish people by their faces. It felt so refreshing, as if I had been reborn.

The seasons changed from winter, to spring—

I moved on to my second year of high school. Takamura-san's class graduated, and it seemed everyone finally accepted Ayana Takamura's disappearance. The school had been dark and depressed for a long time, as if it had lost its sun, but as if it was all swept away with the emergence of the cherry blossoms and the freshness of the new students, it was beginning to regain its peace.

But since then, strange rumors started being whispered in secret.

“Last night, I saw Takamura-senpai.”

Such rumors began swirling simultaneously everywhere.

There were many rumors, like someone who saw a shadow looking their way through the library window, or seeing a figure walking up the stairs of the school building, and it even involved a teacher who suddenly gazed somewhere and blurted out: "Huh? Is that you, Takamura?”

It was probably the numerous rumors that spurred me to do it.

On a certain day after school – I proceeded to the literature club for the first time in six months.

I opened the door with a spare key and at the same time, a nostalgic feeling poured out from within.

Nothing had changed.

Takamu-san’s scent still lingered everywhere, and the bookcase, table, and cabinet with the tea set were still there.

On a narrow vase by the window-side, there was a single flower, a lily.

It was, a black lily.

It was like Senpai: a lonely, solitary and beautiful lily.

The moment I saw that, I sensed a large void unfold in my heart. I felt like I wanted to cry, yet no tears welled up in my eyes, nothing but the wind swept through the sudden void in my heart.

Just beyond the window, the branches of a cherry tree grew in luxuriant abundance, swaying gently in the spring breeze.

The wind shaped itself in a spiral, causing the cherry blossoms to flutter in the air.

It made me realize that even if I didn't like it, the seasons were changing.

And it indicated that I alone remained left behind in the season Senpai was in.

--Why… are you sad?

Together with the cherry petals blowing against the window, I thought I heard someone's voice.

I don’t know, I answered quietly.

--I see, It’s your gift.

I choke up at that nostalgic, scornfully worded expression.

And when I realized that the voice belonged to the Takamura-san who lived inside of me -- I gasped.

I once again took a look around the club room.

I touch the desk, the window frame, the floor - all of it.

I traced the edges of window frame and bookshelves with my fingers.

--Isn’t it strange?

Everything is the same in here. It's been half a year since anyone came to this club room. And yet, there’s no dust, no stagnation in the air. And the strangest thing of all was that this black lily by the window-side that was in full bloom. How can this lily still be blooming when even the water in the pitcher dried up long ago?

When I realized this, my heart began to race so fast I could hear my heartbeat.

Could it be—

Could it be that in this room…?

No, in this school… is she still here?

Even though we can’t see her, is Senpai still here?

Something cold ran down my back.

I suddenly felt someone's eyes on me, and I turned around… to see the woman in the Beksiński poster on the wall… staring at me.

I shook my head, trying to shake off her gaze.

That's when I found the notebook on the table.

It was written in Senpai's handwriting, and titled: 'Dictation -- or the research of texts or sequences of text whose meaning, when understood, can cause spiritual phenomena.' As if drawn toward its long title, I touched the notebook, and at that moment, I was filled with terror. The notebook had the texture of human skin. I gulped, and sat down in the chair. In the light of the setting sun, I opened the notebook alone in the club room. There, in careful handwriting, were a series of words that made no sense at all.

『The inside of a mirror. The mirror's bottom. What do you see in there? 』

『Why are you back? Why are you red? I'm lonely. It's so noisy. 』

『A black train. It's bright red. But it's fast. Because It's very fast. 』

It must be some sort of poem. I didn't know what it meant, but when I read it, something felt distorted in the words inside. It felt as if a fire was burning in the back of my head, and I quickly turned the pages as I skimmed through it. But --- I stopped my fingers at a certain page. Therein was the 'good luck charm' that I had been made to chant repeatedly. And next to it, as an explanation perhaps, was a small note from Senpai.

--A taboo word that separates the subject from their guardian spirit.

That's what was written on there.

And at long last, I finally realized.

As I had thought, I really was being experimented on. Senpai had gathered the effects of these distorted words from countless books. The person who had stood between me and the world that I had been so afraid of, who had existed like a bulwark for me, was slowly disappearing at this moment. But I felt no hatred. Instead, what

welled up in my heart was an inexplicable sorrow.

--- Kotodama[6] hide even more amazing potential.

--- The wasteful potential to clean humans who are garbage.

Cleaning…humans? Tilting my head in confusion, I turned to the next page, where I found a page filled with paragraphs of text. They were normal sentences, but the content within was anything but.

The story of how Senpai had a step-mother. Her step-mother, who didn't cook her any dinner, only doted on her younger step-sister, what's more, she was having an affair with the home tutor Senpai's father had assigned her.

Of how her homeroom teacher, who committed suicide, was persistently trying to woo her despite having a wife and child.

Or how the third-year boy who had been after her tried to attack her after school.

And…

How a new life came to dwell within Senpai's body.

Senpai bore a strong resemblance to her late mother, and in desiring that…her father -- her real father, kept visiting her room. He had crossed the line between parent and child since her middle school years.

–I've always hated photos –

Suddenly recalling Senpai's words, I collapsed down on my knees. I almost threw up the bitterness that was bubbling up inside me, but somehow managed to hold it back in time.

Senpai was—

Senpai was not perceived as a daughter in her father's eyes. She was the spitting image of her deceased mother. That drove her father

mad, and made her the object of her step-mother's envy. Senpai was never in the wrong – but, knowing that her mere presence distorted the world around her, she must have suffered for a long time.

I took deep breaths to calm my racing heart, which was on the verge of bursting – and managed to trace the words once more.

Let's shift the distorted axis on which they stand a little further, is what Senpai wrote in the memo. Let's replace the letters in their vision to taboo words. Little by little. Just a bit at a time. They will see it unconsciously, and it will remain as a seed in their heart. Eventually, the seed will sprout, and blossom. They'll be swallowed by the weakness in their heart. Their minds will be buried by their negative consciousness. How easy it is to kill someone; all you have to do is change the direction of their mind just a tiny fraction. It's fine if they normally turn their face away from what they don't want to see. It's fine if the pain of what they've trampled on always lies in wait besides them.

Senpai's father, who poured his twisted love in her, fell down the stairs and broke his neck. Senpai's tutor, who was having an affair with her step-mother, got caught in the wheel of a truck, turning into nothing more than pulverized meat. The homeroom teacher who was trying to woo her, slit his own throat with a kitchen knife, the resulting blood splatter reached all the way up to the ceiling. The male student who tried to assault her, jumped off the top of the school building, his head crushed deep back inside his body.

Right next to those grisly scenes, the image of Senpai, with her vacant eyes sprung to my mind. Thin as a paper doll, she stood lurched over with her dark, hollow eyes.

I snapped the notebook shut. Where am I? Who am I? I wanted to properly recognize that, so I opened the window. Sticking out my face, I pumped the spring air, full of life, into my lungs.

--There's no doubt about it anymore.

Senpai killed people, and not just one or two. It was something that would remain hidden for eternity, as long as no one found this note. No, even if someone were to find it, who would believe such a thing?

The idea of killing people through words. In this country, talking about ghost phenomenon is frowned upon. The occult is nothing more than children's fairy tales, and it's not even researched.

As I regained my breath, I looked down at the notebook again - and the moment I noticed the words inscribed on the back cover of the notebook, I got inexplicable goosebumps.

--Hey, did you notice?

Those words, with an unknown addressee, concluded the book.

I don't remember how long I was there alone.

I just sat back in my chair, holding the notebook in my lap, dumbfounded. The wind blowing in from the window had turned cold, and it was now completely dark outside.

I stood up feeling dizzy, and closed the window.

And…as I was about to turn on the light switch—

I suddenly heard someone's voice close to my ear.

In a panic, I switched the light switch on.

However, the room remained dark as the fluorescent lights remained off. Despite this, I kept flipping the switch on and off again and again with my trembling fingers.

In the darkness, that voice continued to whisper in my ear.

--Humans are the embodiment of malice.

Those…were words Senpai once spoke.

The voice continued to echo around me as I kept clicking the switch.

"It's best to be suspicious of what appears to be good at first glance."

“People only act according to their interests, and they can be perverted in any way by their interests.”

“Sinful acts were unavoidable -- is how they justify it afterwards.”

“They pretend not to see the things they trample underneath.”

“Religion, music, novels, movies, paintings...”

“It’s all a business.”

“They're not there as a piece of a dream…”

“They only serve as a gateway for someone’s profit through the economy.”

“The only way to break free of this twisted world – is to erase the body.”

Senpai’s countless remarks replayed in my head like a chorus.

Or so I was trying to believe.

--Everything in this world is a lie.

The black miasma that fills the club room almost engulfs me.

I continued to feel someone's eyes on me. That gaze was right behind me. I was alone in the room, of course. But there was someone standing right behind me. A nostalgic tall figure stood there. But it wasn’t the person I knew anymore.

--I’m scared. But it was useless to try and run away. I somehow knew that if I ran, I would be chased for the rest of my life. It was already there. Senpai had strongly rooted herself inside me.

I balance my heart.

I catch my breath.

I put strength in my stomach.

“I—”

I can't show any weakness. If I do, I'll be taken over. I'll be swallowed up by the bottomless darkness that was closing in right behind me.

"I think it's not just malice."

It took all I had to spout out those words.

"Because Senpai, you—"

Unbeknownst, tears had started to flow from my eyes.

"You told me to forget everything, didn't you?!"

The person known as Ayana Takamura, knew where she stood. She knew where she stood, and she probably knew that she was in the wrong place. Yet, she remained there helplessly. She stood there, alone and isolated, wanting someone to understand her. She just wanted a person who could see things the same way she saw them. She had been searching for a long time, but she couldn't find anyone who could stand there. No – she finally learned that she couldn't let them stand there. That's why she told me to forget everything.

What should I do? Senpai had disappeared. She ended up vanishing. In all likelihood, she was no longer a living being. How should I confront this thing that used to be Senpai from here on?

I found myself standing under the lights which had switched on—

I took out a plastic garbage bag from the cupboard, then threw the notebook inside, and the vase along with the black lily into it. I then ripped the poster off the wall while doing my best not to look at it, and threw that into the bag as well. I put the tea kettle in there, and everything that had a trace of Senpai's presence. I thoroughly cleaned everywhere in the club room as if I were trying to erase all traces and signs, everything of the other world that Senpai was engulfed in.

I have to start over again. The only way to get rid of these inescapable thoughts is to overwrite them. This club, this school, must be reborn as an origin of hope. From now on -- I must face the monsters as myself. I must walk the depths of the other world with my body firmly tied to this world.

From here on, I must bear the abyss of the other world[7] -- for the rest of my life.

After using up all my strength to clean the club room, I ran outside.

Under the setting sun, I rushed away from the school without looking back.

○

Under a clear, blue sky—

White smoke billowed from the incinerator up to the heavens.

Early next morning, I arrived at school before classes started, visited the club room again, and threw away the functional bookshelf. In its place, I set up an old bookshelf that was abandoned behind the library. I swapped all the books as well. I swapped all the curtains, the slippers, and everything else with things I had brought from home. I carried out all of the things with a strong trace of Senpai one after another, and brought them to the front of the incinerator on a cart. One by one, I threw them into the fire.

--Let's disband the literature club. But if that's all that's done, the club room will come back to life again when kids who are interested in literature appear. So, I should close the club and start a new one here at the same time by borrowing the name of my friends. A club that will put off any ordinary students wanting to join – That's right, a club that gives the impression of being too complex to join would be good. How about something like 'Journalism Research Society'?

(-- Constantly updating information, is that your gift?)

I hear Senpai chuckling under her breath in the blowing wind.

I ignore her voice.

Pretending not to hear anything, I throw the black lily in the fire.

(-- But… it will betray you someday.)

As I listened to that voice in the wind---

I took out that photo from the plastic bag, and put it into the incinerator while trying not to look at it.

It was instantly engulfed in the fire. In the churning orange flames, the polaroid photograph crumpled as it writhed in the heat.

“……..Goodbye……..Senpai……”

I heard my voice mixed in with the sobs, as if it were someone else’s. In the midst of the blurred and crumbling scene -- Senpai was still smiling gently.

○

“It’s already…. been five years since then.”

With the long, long story finally over—

Krishna-san took a sip of iced tea, which was now completely lukewarm.

Even though it was early October, the sound of cicadas reached my ears, as if representing the unyielding summer that persisted.

In any case, I had no idea what I should say. It was my first time hearing this story, and yet somehow, I felt like I had heard it somewhere before.

“The reason I became involved with the world beyond -- well, it was because of this. I must continue to investigate. I have to keep looking into the traces of the faint ‘them’ that Senpai referred to. Their sorrow. Their delusions. I have to keep my mind steady so I don’t get swallowed up by it, and proceed with their classification. If I don't do that – then sooner or later, I’ll be swallowed by her eyes.”

Krishna-san spoke with a somewhat distant look in her eyes.

“I don’t know if what I’m doing is actually confronting things. Maybe I'm just running away. But by watching my Ayana Takamura-senpai up close, I learned that there was a world I could not step into, no matter what. I learned that there was a world right next to us we shouldn’t get deeply involved in. That’s why I felt I had to classify it. And that was the beginning of the website ‘Ikaigabuchi’.”

I squirmed and looked to the side, and saw Yoishi sitting there, expressionless as ever.

A few days had passed since Krishna-san had lost consciousness in the club room.

On that afternoon, Yoishi and I had been abruptly called up to the club room by Krishna-san, and while I had expected her to start lecturing us, she unexpectedly told us the story about her high school days. The story behind her Senpai who had disappeared.

“That was not Senpai’s only experiment involving taboo words. She had placed countless taboo words on stone monuments, the school anthem, and student council slogans that students casually looked at throughout the school. Most of them have now been corrected or removed. But I didn't know about that book mixed in with the other library books.”

The petite occult site manager spoke with a sorrowful face that was uncharacteristic of her.

The book she was talking about was of course ‘Rororo’. The book that bastard Sako had taken away, it seems the crazy person who put the book there was her Senpai. In the clock tower, in the cat, in the club

room early in the morning, and in the library, I learned that the dark gaze that had been staring at me was apparently her.

“So, after that Senpai of yours disappeared, that’s when you met Sako?”

Krishna-san silently nodded.

“I told you before that I had been through a lot – well, even after I changed everything to new in the literature club room, I still continued to hear Senpai’s voice for a while. I ultimately met him through a priest who knew my parents. That was when I finally managed to stop hearing Senpai’s voice – but it still didn’t disappear completely. Just by living my life, my spine naturally distorts, and I start hearing Senpai’s voice again. That's why I've been getting my spine corrected on a regular basis. But the other day, Takita-san showed up unexpectedly. And he told me, ‘It's time to cut off the source.’”

“Cut off… the source?”

“He was trying to remove all the taboo words that had been left behind in the school – he was probably talking about ‘Rororo’. That’s what he said. He asked me to lend him any of the things left behind by Senpai. So, I offered him the notebook that contained the taboo words – but that’s when that photograph fell out of it. That photograph Senpai and I had taken together. I thought I had burned it properly – but… no, I don't know if the memory of burning it was my desire or not -- I just don't know anymore.”

As I stared at my lap in silence, Krishna added with a groan.

“Anyway, I think it’s best to leave it to an expert from now on.”

…An expert. In short, that means it’s up to that bastard Sako.

Somehow or another, I had understood most of the story--

But even after I had finished listening, something creepy still remained. That Senpai of hers, the mystery of what she was trying to do by laying out all those taboo words on campus – and the fundamental question of where she had disappeared to and what

became of her.

I asked Krishna-san, and she just shook her head slightly.

“I don’t know. No… to tell you the truth, I don’t want to know. My honest opinion might be that I don’t want to think about it at all. I have a feeling that the moment someone figures out Senpai’s plan, is when it might actually be realized.”

I shuddered at her words.

That’s right – that book she wrote. It was titled: ‘Dictation -- or the research of texts or sequences of text whose meaning, when understood, can cause spiritual phenomena’.

“It's been five years since then. Takamura-senpai is probably not alive. But if you ask me if she has disappeared from this world, I can't confirm that. That’s because Senpai’s thoughts still exist everywhere in this school.”

After that, Krishna-san shifted her gaze to the gloomy, silent Yoishi sitting next to me.

“Yoishi Mitsurugi. I sense that you see a different world than most people. And that means it's different from what Nagi-kun and I see. It’s filled with things people shouldn't know. It’s filled with things that shouldn’t be talked about. That's why I warned Nagi-kun not to get involved with you. Do you have any objection to that?”

“…I don’t.”

Yoishi muttered.

“This person and I just can't get mix.”

“Well, it's true that the confused emotions inside me are encouraging that idea even more. In other words, you remind me too much of Takamura-senpai, someone who went too far into the other world and couldn't come back. That’s somethings that’s very sad. A person who has discovered the depths of the darkness. And someone else who has become connected with that person. Mutual involvement leads everyone to misery.”

“That’s true, certainly.”

Yoishi nodded while swaying her leather shoes one on top of the other.

From the window of the Beatnik Research club, cheerful laughter emanated from the students outside and reached our ears. A breeze full of life poured into the room. Feeling it on my cheeks – I also felt an immeasurable distance between myself and Yoishi, who was sitting right next to me. It’s true that I also felt that Yoishi did not stand in the depths of darkness by choice. Something unthinkable happened in her past, which turned her into this supernatural psychic antenna that everyone is pulled towards. But I also knew that I just couldn’t do it anymore. I still have a functioning sense of fear. In addition, I'm much more unqualified than others as an occult enthusiast, and a weakling to boot.

That’s why –

That’s why, it’s impossible for me to be your friend.

I failed to say those words out loud; all I could do was continue to look downwards.

How much time had passed—

The black shadow gently moved besides me.

Yoishi lifted her pale face, straightened her legs, and leaned forwards to speak.

“But – it’s already too late.”

With a start, Krishna-san looked up as Yoishi continued:

“Because after all, the subject of that missing Senpai’s experiment… is not you.”

“…What are you saying?”

“In your evaluation of the person called Ayana Takamura, you said this: She had a strong grasp on everything from where she stood, and a strong will to accomplish her goals. She also had no lingering attachments to her flesh and body.”

“What about it?”

“With respect to the various details you’ve given us this far, you still hold a very clear memory of Ayana Takamura. It's so vivid that I can picture it in my mind when I hear it. She provided you with just one escape route, and yet, you failed to notice it.”

Krishna-san’s face grew pale at Yoishi’s intermittent speech.

“Why did you tell us about her?”

“That was because….”

“Why do you still have the notebook?”

“That was… to research taboo words, just in case….”

Krishna-san’s voice grew hoarse, as Yoishi shook her head, ‘No’.

“Ayana Takamura told you to forget everything. Her face, her voice, her scent, all of it. You were supposed to forget everything the same time you burned all her belongings. And yet --- just now, you’ve spread her existence into this world.”

Those words made Krishna-san lose her voice, and my vision darkened.

Krishna-san hated the darkness that had swallowed up her Senpai, but she couldn’t hate the person her Senpai was. That was because of Krishna's kindness and compassion, the foundation of her humanity. I knew that this compassion served as the source of her strength. But –

“Humans are the embodiment of malice.”

Without showing any mercy, and with glee spun in her words, Yoishi

continued.

“That of course, includes the person who uttered those words, Ayana Takamura herself. And right now, everything is going exactly how she wished.”

Somewhere far away, I heard someone’s laughter.

A laughter filled with delight echoed, indicating that everything was going according to their plan.

The laughter kept ringing in my ears; I shook my head, as if to drive it away. But the black fog that engulfed my vision grew thicker and thicker.

Eventually, Yoishi stood up on her own, and spoke:

“In the language of flowers, the lily represents purity and innocence – but the black lily means something else.”

She slowly walked up to the door, where she turned to face us once more.

That pale face filled with ecstasy. Those dark eyes that shone with a bewitching glow. As if enjoying our speechlessness, she spoke:

“It means, ‘I curse you.’”

Case 08: Does the Place Underground Exist, or not?

1.

Yoishi Mitsurugi… seems to have disappeared.

I heard a rumor like that around the middle of October – yes, just about a week after I heard the story about Krishna-san's high school-days in the club room. The creepy story of Ayana Takamura, Krishna-san's denpa senpai...err[8] or should I say, her senpai who was just a little too into the occult. I still felt a haunting gaze hanging over my head -- but humans have a way of adjusting to things. A few days after I had decided to stay away from Yoishi, the fear inside me gradually receded. In the first place, it's only scary when you think about it. It's not like anything had happened since then, and then there was that bastard Sako, I didn't quite trust his words and actions, but he seemed to be working on it. As they say, one should go to a specialist for best results[9], and as long as an expert was working on it, I would probably just be in the way as an amateur.

I tried to convince myself by using that logic, in fact, the more I tried my best not to think about scary things, the more I began to forget them. I guess that was the carefree part of me.

Well, anyway -- about Yoishi. At the time, I don't think I was too worried when I was told that Yoishi had disappeared. I felt no seriousness when the word 'disappeared' was used for her of all people. At first, I thought she was probably digging around in some graveyards, exploring some abandoned ruins, or some other dangerous haunted place. However, the reality seems to have been different. She was said to have suddenly disappeared from school in

broad daylight.

"Her leather shoes were left at the entrance. It's already been a whole day now."

Yukihito Kurimoto-kun spoke, with a gloomy expression on his handsome face.

"Huh? She's been missing since yesterday, and the school's just letting things be?"

"That's the type of school it is."

Yukihito-kun explained with a sad smile.

"I don't know if it's what you'd call letting sleeping dogs, or a lack of urgency -- and well, she has a history of leaving school early many times without permission."

As could be surmised by his surname, Yukihito Kurimoto-kun was Krishna-san's aka Shiina Kurimoto-san's four-year younger brother. He was also a first-year in high school belonging to the same Koumei institute affiliated high school as Yoishi, and he gave the impression of being a freshman who everyone liked. Like Krishna-san, he was also what you would call baby faced -- his shoulders were broad and his figure was tall, so he didn't look like a girl, and the black blazer matched well with his tall, slender figure. He had arrived at the university's Beatnik research society club room on his lunch break to inform us of Yoishi's disappearance.

"So, Yukihito. How is the school dealing with it?"

Krishna-san asked, Yukihito nodded once and replied:

"At first, it was 'Not again'. I heard they tried to contact her household, but since Mitsurugi-san lives alone and she's gone off somewhere, then naturally, no one would answer. They also tried to contact her distant uncle who was registered as her guardian, but he was unreachable. And today, the teachers searched the campus, but she was still nowhere to be found. Also, I didn't know about this before, but I heard she once went AWOL for three days and came to school the next day as if nothing had happened -- so that's why they

decided to call the police if she didn't show up until tomorrow."

Calling the police after two days…?

How the hell can the teachers in the affiliated school be acting so carefree? Dammit.

I seethed with resentment while acting blind to my own shortcomings. Krishna-san then asked Yukihito-kun:

"If I remember correctly, you and Yoishi are in different classes, right?"

"I'm in class D, and she's in class A. I don't know her directly, and I don't think she knows me. But for my part, I've been kind of worried about Mitsurugi-san."

"Why is that?"

"Even though she tries not to associate with anyone, she sure stands out. Even though she's pretty, she has a strangely strong intimidating air about her, like she's a natural jewel mixed in among the polished artificial jewels – She's always reading alone at her desk, looking somewhat lonely, but the invisible barrier that keeps her one meter away from everyone instead makes her stand out all the more."

Ah, I get it. I mean, I can totally picture it in my head.

"Being late and leaving early without permission so many times means the teachers don't know how to handle her. So, it might be because of that -- but even though she disappeared within the school this time, I have a feeling that the school didn't search the campus very seriously. They probably just assumed she went home by herself and then went off somewhere."

In short, it seemed Yukihito-kun had come to ask if we could search for her together if possible.

"So Yukihito, you think that Yoishi is still somewhere in the school,?"

Krishna asked, and Yukihito nodded with a slight scowl.

“I can’t say it with absolute certainty, though.”

“The teachers who know the campus in and out have already searched all the important places, right? What good will it do if we start looking now?”

“But—”

Thereupon, Yukihito-kun grinned broadly.

“Mitsurugi-san is a person who belongs to nee-san’s[10] side, right?”

…I see, in other words, an outcast who chases after the faint beings known as ghosts.

“That’s why I thought you might also have a unique perspective and search method.”

Thereafter, Yukihito-kun looked at us and once again lowered his head.

“Well then, I look forward to working with you two.”

○

That’s what happened in the club room yesterday—

And now, here we were. The three of us were wandering together inside the Koumei affiliated high school at the start of lunchtime. To be honest, I had finally been able to get away from all sorts of problems by distancing myself from Yoishi, and I was quite apprehensive about searching for her – but this time, I was together with Krishna-san which was quite reassuring, and more importantly, there was a wonderful event waiting for me that would erase those apprehensions.

“Now just wait a minute, Yukihito.”

As if hiding behind me, Krishna-san spoke with her voice trailing off.

“It’s alright if we’re searching for Yoishi. She disappeared inside the school, so I know I need to be here to look for her. But – but… isn’t it a huge mistake for me to be dressed up like this?”

I almost burst into laughter, and turned around to see –

A black blazer and a white blouse.

A black tie around her neck, a black skirt, navy-blue socks and black leather shoes.

Krishna-san was dressed in the Koumei school uniform. She was undeniably cute with her flush red face, as she restlessly followed me and Yukihito Kurimoto-kun.

“It can’t be helped. It’s forbidden for anyone other than staff and students to come in here, and it’s best to wear a school uniform since we’re going to talk to the other students.”

“I could have come here as your guardian on a tour, or to collect some data for a news article from my alma mater, or something.”

“If we did that, then it would just put the students on guard.”

“That won’t do, Krishna-san.”

I unintentionally butted in.

“I’m so glad. You look so cute.”

The bust of her blouse was a little too tight, and the short skirt that showed off her white thighs was a feast for the eyes. I was also embarrassed when I put on Yukihito-kun's spare uniform, but I was so thrilled with Krishna-san's uniform that I was easily able to brush that aside.

“You were still a high school student half a year ago so it’s fine for you. I’m almost 21. It makes me cringe to think that a few years ago I was wearing such a short skirt!”

“If it were to shrink any further, it would be a real problem, wouldn’t it?”

“Leave me alone!”

I chuckled as Krishna-san yelled at me after pushing up her red glasses, which were slipping off, when Yukihito-kun spoke.

“Anyway, it’s reassuring to know that you two will be joining the search for her on campus. I appreciate it.”

He quickly bowed his head and with a grunt, Krishna-san fell silent.

I was once again deeply impressed by the boy known as Yukihito Kurimoto. As was expected from a younger brother of Krishna-san -- he was always calm, his choice of words was clear and logical, and on top of all that he had mastered the art of instantly silencing Krishna-san's temper tantrums. And yet, there is not the slightest hint of arrogance in his behavior that belittles his good looks or talent, and the bashful smile on his face was striking to see even as a man.

However—

Why was a person like Yukihito-kun so concerned about Yoishi?

Is it because of that? Is it because he’s actually a little attracted to her?

I watched Yukihito Kurimoto-kun’s tall figure from behind as we continued from the courtyard to the main school building. I could feel the sincerity from his back as he walked straight ahead. He might have only been around fifteen years old or so, but he still exuded that. Like my father often used to say: A man speaks with his back rather than his mouth. Indeed, it occurred to me that an upright boy like him might be a good fit for someone with a curved spine and a twisted way of life like Yoishi. I thought that somewhat sadly, considering I had a distorted past myself.

In any case, it was youthfulness that filled my field of vision.

A crowd of schoolgirls almost falling down as they laugh over something. A group of smiling school boys standing shoulder to shoulder and jokingly jabbing each other.

Lunch break had just started, and the school was bursting with an overflowing sense of freedom.

There were kids running by at full speed. There were kids making strange noises and were being berated by a passing teacher. Witnessing such a scene before my eyes, I think to myself, ‘ Ah Dammit, I’ve gotten old’, even though I was only 18. Just like Krishna-san said, I was a high school student just half a year ago, and yet, it felt like so long ago. It would be true to say that the past six months of my life had been pretty intense, but I was still extremely jealous. Especially seeing how dazzling the girls looked in their school uniforms. I mean, when Yoishi wears a black blazer with a tie, it looks like a mourning dress, but when a respectable girl wears it, it looks so elegant and cute.

As I walked through the crowd of high school girls in skirts so short you could almost see their panties, I went, "Alright," to myself and decided to enjoy the situation. Being able to infiltrate another high school wearing their uniform is not something you get to experience often. I've always had a secret admiration for Daniel Craig. It wouldn't be a bad idea to pretend to be 007 for a change – so I adjusted my hairstyle. I let my bangs down, just so I could make myself look a little younger.

“Hey, Nagi-kun. What are you doing?”

“…Uh. Just trying to make my hair style like a high schooler’s.”

“You look young enough to be okay. The problem is me. I wonder if I should wear pigtails or something.”

“Ehhh… did you wear pigtails in your high school days?”

“No, I’ve had this hair style since my primary school years.”

“Then it’s meaningless, right? You still look a middle school student

afte----owwww!”

She pinched me in the back as hard as she could.

“But isn’t everyone staring at me? Look? They're looking at me right now, too. Isn't there something wrong with this outfit?

“It’s just your imagination. Just act natural.”

While such a conversation was unfolding – ‘Ah, damn it’, Yukihito-kun turned around and spoke.

“What are we going to do about the indoor shoes? They sell them at the school store, but buying them is just silly. Hmm. Just wait a moment.”

Saying that, Yukihito-kun ran off somewhere. Watching his receding figure, I talked to Krishna-san.

“Well, your brother turned out very nicely, didn’t he?”

“Well…I guess. Because Yukihito is so dependable, I’m able to indulge myself in this kind of thing.”

“This kind of thing?”

“The occult.”

…I see.

“But Yukihito knowing about Yoishi is messed up. It would be better off if he doesn’t get interested in my field.”

“It’ll be fine. He seems pretty dependable.”

“No, this kind of thing is dangerous to get into. People tend to become obsessed about it.”

“Ah, I understand.”

When I think about it, many of the regulars of the occult site "Ikaigabuchi", especially the ones who are really into it, are well-established members of society. Many of them are intellectuals, or

whatever you want to call them, who have established a proper social foundation and are truly devoted to their occult hobby. If I look at the people I met at the offline meeting, I was amazed at the vast range of their specialties: There were people I had seen on TV, university professors and those that ran their own companies.

“But… just what happened to Yoishi?”

Krishna-san spoke with a grunt, as she crossed her arms and fell silent.

That uncharacteristically inarticulate way of speaking – it made me think. Could it be that Krishna-san was still thinking of that senpai who disappeared five years ago? Ayana Takamura: who could perceive ghosts, was well versed in taboo words, insanely immersed herself in the occult and ended up disappearing.

That girl also abruptly disappeared one day in the school. ‘You remind me too much of Takamura-senpai’, is what Krishna-san said to Yoishi.

It was true that, just as Ayana Takamura had the spread the taboo words ‘If you read, you’ll die’ through the school, Yoishi too had spread the ‘read at your own risk’ type ghost stories on the net in the past. But when you think about it, that was to save me, and in that sense, I was just as guilty as she was.

“…Say, Krishna-san.”

“Hm?”

“I finally managed to get Yoishi’s contact details the other day. Well, I tried calling her a while ago but I couldn't get through.”

Saying that, I moved to take out my phone from my pocket – when I saw Krishna-san glaring at me.

“A lot of things happened, and things got a little hazy -- but how long have you been meeting Yoishi for?”

“…Eh?”

“I told you, didn't I? As long as you're a member of the club, not to associate with Yoishi anymore. You definitely promised me that, so was it all a lie?”

“N-not at all. It wasn’t a lie—it was more of a coincidence, an unavoidable fate, or rather, it was more like I was a victim of a bolt of lightning from out of the blue.”

As my incoherent answer continued, I saw Yukihito-kun rushing back to us. Like meeting a Buddha in hell, I waved at him.

“Ah, Yukihito-kun! Over here!”

“Sorry to keep you two waiting. These are slippers meant for guests, but I think it’ll be fine. Please enter the school building with these.”

“Ohh, thanks a lot.”

“That, and this as well.”

He handed out two armbands. They were embroidered in red on a black background with the words ‘Koumei Academy Newspaper Club’.

“I employed the ‘collecting data for a news article’ strategy Nee-san mentioned earlier, I borrowed it from my friends in the newspaper club. The two of them are third-year students, so please pretend to be third-year students belonging to the newspaper club. Sure, if you pretend to be there to collect data for a news article, you won't arouse suspicion in the first-year classrooms – but just be careful with the teachers. Especially you, Nee-san, many of the teachers here still know you.”

“…Alright.”

“For the time being, let’s try and retrace Mitsurugi-san’s steps on the day she disappeared. Let’s start by asking around in her class, after that we’ll narrow down the places she frequented, and if we search her desk and belongings, we might be able to find something.”

“Can’t you do that by yourself Yukihito? Why is there a need for me to wear this—”

Casually ignoring Krishna-san's grumblings, Yukihito-kun continued:

"Okay, let's start with her classroom."

Yukihito-kun took the lead and walked in front of us. Stifling my laughter, I followed behind him, beckoning Krishna-san along, who was still mumbling about something.

2.

And so, we began our investigation on the missing Yoishi.

In class A on the second floor of the main school building, we found her reputation to be even more horrible than I had imagined.

“Generally speaking, she’s a creepy girl.”

“She’s always staring off somewhere.”

“She’s always looking at gruesome pictures of people dismembered.”

“Photo books of corpses, right? That’s super gross.”

“There’s a rumor that she eats frogs, but I wonder if it's true.”

“It stinks so much when you get close to her.”

“It really does! A gutter-like stink.”

“She’s always vomiting.”

“And she doesn’t even clean up when she does that.”

“She seems to have a weak body, but isn’t she weak in spirit as well?”

“She seems like the type to suddenly go and kill herself.”

“Ahahaha. Exactly. There's a girl who said she saw her scars from wrist cutting or something.”

I couldn’t tell how many times I clenched my fists while listening to them, thinking I was gonna beat the shit out of these first-year brats. But each time, I managed to bear with it when the Kurimoto siblings, who were quick to sense my intentions tugged at my sleeves.

I was supposed to be firm in my determination to not associate with

Yoishi anymore – but hearing her be insulted so unabashedly made my innards seethe with anger. It was probably because of the smirk on their faces as they spoke ill of Yoishi. I mean, why do people seem to have so much fun when they bad-mouth someone? Are they so eager in wanting to create someone inferior to themselves in a group? The image of Yoishi's figure painfully walking out of the main school gate suddenly came to mind. She always looked exhausted as she staggered outside, as if all the energy had been sucked out of her.

"Anyway, do any of you have any idea on Mitsurugi-san's whereabouts?"

Krishna-san inquired, making a point of flaunting off her 'newspaper club' badge. In response, the first-year students in front of us simply exchanged looks and laughed.

"Noooo idea."

…Don't be happily inflecting your words when a person has disappeared.

I felt the rage bellow up inside me once more, but barely managed to hold it in. At any rate, I could infer that she was at the bottom of the school pecking order in just five minutes according to their stories. It seemed that even in school, she lived exactly as the 'Yoishi Mitsurugi' I knew. Not to mention that middle school and high school are the most brutal insular environments where only the body gets bigger while the mind remains that of a child. It's true that in that environment, if you're sitting there looking at picture books of dead bodies, refusing to taking baths, throwing up all over the place, and continuing to act like a denpa, you're bound to end up like that.

"But why is the newspaper club looking into Mitsurugi-san?"

A lone girl asked, and Krishna-san smiled in response.

"Actually, the research she's been doing has been attracting a lot of attention at overseas universities in recent years, so we thought we should cover it."

The guys in class A were blown away by those words. And me, as

well. Yukihito-kun alone grinned as he looked at Krishna-san.

“They often say there’s a thin line between genius and insanity – but she has an unparalleled ability to focus when she's immersed in her research. That might seem a bit eccentric and strange to an outsider, but well, I hope all of you will continue to warmly watch over her.”

Saying that, she turned to casually motion to Yukihito-kun. Understanding what she meant, he said, “Excuse me”, and approached Yoishi’s chair, then he began to take pictures of her desk and the notebooks inside with his cell phone camera.

“Now that you mention it…”

Was it encouragement from Krishna-san’s bluff? One of the boys timidly stepped forward.

“A few days ago, Mitsurugi spoke to me.”

“Seriously?”

He nodded as I stepped forward.

“As I recall, she asked me what the most depressing place in our school was.”

“Most…depressing place?”

“Yeah. That’s right. Was it part of some kind of research?”

“…It might be. So, how did you answer?”

“Well… I said the staff room, but…”

He replied looking somewhat embarrassed, but that was actually a normal answer for a student. Indeed, the staff room was the most depressing place for me in high school, as well.

“And how did she respond?”

“She just said: ‘Hmmm.’”

Well, I guessed as much. And that normal student’s idea was

definitely not the answer she was looking for.

“She asked that from me as well.”

Eventually, a girl at the far back of the room with her hair tied up on both sides of her head opened her mouth.

“And what did you answer?”

Being pressed by Krishna-san, the girl cast her eyes downwards somewhat and kept silent for a moment before answering.

“The school grounds.”

“…Huh?”

“I said the school grounds. When I stand in ground number one in the morning assembly, I always get dizzy. I might have low blood pressure or something.”

Her response prompted laughter from the guys in class A, but –

I witnessed it. Krishna-san gulped as she bit her lip and sank into silence.

A gloomy expression – as if gulping down iron, like she had recalled something she had tried so hard to forget.

Even after we left Class A, Krishna-san continued to act distant and silent. She seemed to be lost in thought, and no matter what I asked, she gave me a distracted answer.

I shrugged my shoulders, and looked to Yukihito-kun.

“Now let’s try and ask about her in the other classes.”

Yukihito-kun began to lead us once more.

First off, we checked in Class B. Then on to the neighboring class C. And finally, Yukihito-kun’s class D at the end.

We first asked if they knew of ‘Yoishi Mitsurugi’ from class A, and if

they had seen her anywhere. But perhaps it was because it was a different class. We failed to get any more information than what we obtained from class A.

But anyway, for the time being –

Let's summarize what we've learned so far about Yoishi on the day of her disappearance.

Yoishi disappeared in Math class two days ago during second period. She seems to have said she was going to the infirmary as she left the classroom. However, when the homeroom teacher inquired during homeroom at the end of day, there was no sign of Yoishi having visited the infirmary. Afterwards, the homeroom teacher tried to contact Yoishi's household, but no one responded. In the end, they just let things be for a whole day, and finally on the second day, it became a problem for the school when they realized that her black leather shoes were still in the shoe rack; Whereupon, they tried to contact her guardian: her uncle. But they failed to make contact with him. Class committee members and teachers from each class searched the school. However, they couldn't find her. Taking into account the fact that she had previously been absent for three days without leave, they decided to wait the next day (In short -- today) and if she didn't appear, they would contact the police.

As a person who knows Yoishi well, a part of me wants to sympathize with the school's way of dealing with things – however, even though she might be a denpa, she's still a student dammit. What the hell do they think of a precious student's life that's under their care? What's more, Yoishi had disappeared within the school in broad daylight. Shouldn't they be searching for her more urgently than they were now?

Then, as we were left class D, Yukihito-kun spoke:

"I think the reaction of teachers and students alike to Mitsurugi-san is probably related to the 'witch trial incident'."

"Witch…trial?"

"It happened In April of this year – during the early part of the

entrance ceremony. I didn't even know her name at the time, but when she suddenly showed up late for the ceremony in the main auditorium, she was called out by the principal, who particularly disliked people who weren't punctual, and denounced her in front of the entire school, telling her to express her remorse."

"Huh? Just for being late?"

"Yes."

To denounce someone in front of the entire school…what educational benefit does that have?

"So that's why it's called the witch trial incident?'

I asked in disgust, Yukihito-kun chuckled and shook his head in response.

"No. That's not why. The incident happened after that. At first, Yoishi Mitsurugi-san stood in silence when put on stage in front of the whole school. Her homeroom teacher, who had to save face in front of the principal, kept pestering her to hurry up and apologize – And eventually, um…"

"…Yeah?"

"She threw up right then and there."

"Ahh."

It was all too predictable. In such a situation, most people tend to shoot a cruel gaze, as if they are witnessing a spectacle. The moment when someone gets angry becomes a unique type of occasion. The daily routine is disrupted. At that moment, people end up expecting some kind of special event. However, this expectation contains a kind of malice that more or less everyone possesses. And Yoishi Mitsurugi reacted to the malice of others. Regardless of location, her peculiar trait would force her to throw up whenever faced with a strong malice –

And with that train of thought, I came to realize--

Come to think of it, Yoishi hadn't thrown up in front of me since we had met again in Tokyo. Neither in the clock tower, nor in the cat incident, nor in the Rororo incident, she didn't vomit even once.

"At any rate, I think it was a very cruel thing to do to a girl. In fact, I remember there were some people in my class who felt sorry for her. But what happened afterwards was why she became legendary. After she had finished vomiting, she didn't even wipe her mouth -- and merely muttered 'How absurd.' into the microphone."

"…Huh?"

"That whisper, however, was amplified by the microphone. It filled the auditorium and reached the ears of every student in the school. Without even turning to look back at the flustered face of the principal, she continued: 'Do you really think that forcing your emotions on people by force is education?' In a panic her homeroom teacher tried to get her off the stage, but she clung to the mic and declared: 'People haven't changed at all since the days of the witch trials.' In the end, she was forced to leave the buzzing assembly hall -- but after that, Mitsurugi-san became pretty famous. That was when I first thought that she was an interesting girl."

Yukihito-kun spoke happily, as if he were boasting about a close friend. I can't deny that I also thought, 'Good job, Yoishi,' while listening to his story. It must have been especially significant for high school students, the generation that rebels against their superiors. The principal, who was used to lording it over everyone was humiliated in front of the whole school. It really was a special event.

But—

On the other hand, I felt gloomy when I thought about Yoishi's future.

Why couldn't she just let things slide? Why did she have to denounce that stupid teacher in public? Bringing yourself down to an idiot's level, that's just like having a full-on argument with a kid- wait... huh? The teacher's the adult, so does that put the teacher in the wrong? She was innocent, and yet, since when did I end up being the one who compromised with society?

The more I thought about it, the harder it became to tell who was right or wrong, when –

“—Nagi-kun, Yukihito.”

I suddenly heard a voice behind me. I turned around to see Krishna-san stopped in the middle of the hallway, staring our way with a serious look on her face.

“I need to check something, is it alright if we split up for a bit?”

“Huh?”

“I’ll contact you as soon as I’m done.”

I was a bit puzzled, but Yukhito-kun nodded.

“That’s fine, I was thinking of heading to the staff room next as well. But it would be a bit of a problem to take Nee-san and Nagito-san there with me, so I was wondering what to do.”

“Sorry. Well then, let’s split up.”

“A-ah, wait a m--.”

Don’t just rush the conversation by yourselves.

I was about to say that, but Krishna-san had already run off in a complete girly run. The way her short skirt waved as she ran made me feel like she was much more of a high school student than I was.

“Well, if you'll excuse me as well.”

Yukihito-kun spoke out, making me panic.

“Hey, just wait a minute. What am I supposed to do?”

“Nagito-san, please take a nice and relaxing walk in the school.”

He smiled and walked away – Hey, are you just gonna leave me here in a hallway full of high school students? It’s definitely been somewhat entertaining, but suddenly being left alone is quite unnerving – while I stood there flustered, a gym teacher in a jersey

with a shaved head and a big build suddenly came lumbering down from the other side.

“……Hmph.”

The moment he passed me by, he threw a fierce glare my way – Unconsciously, I cowered back. That overbearing face clearly had ‘What are you looking at?’ written all over it, and my face probably indicated ‘Sorry for looking you in the eye’. I meekly bowed my head, and the gym teacher nodded with a grunt, and passed me by with a confident strut. Once he got sufficiently far away, I gently turned around and finally let out a long sigh.

“At any rate, it’s gonna be a problem if I stay in the hallway.”

For the time being, I decided to visit the infirmary Yoishi headed towards before she disappeared.

○

“Huh…Here too?”

I retraced my steps and went back again, only to find another dead end.

I crossed the corridor, descended the stairs, and returned to the entrance. From there I went out to the courtyard, and checked the school map. The infirmary was supposed to be somewhere between the school building and the grounds – but for some reason, I couldn't quite get there. It wasn’t like I was someone with a poor sense of direction or anything, but this seemed to have something to do with the structure of the school building. The main school building and the special lab building are constructed in a strange oval shape, and if I normally tried to go around the school building, I would get stuck.

I was about to return, when I noticed several students had gathered in the corner of the courtyard; They were working on a large, flashy signboard, noisily chatting away. On it, in a fancy font, were the

words: "The 115th Koumei Institute Mary Festival".

Oh – now that I think about it, the festival is pretty soon. I don't remember if the affiliated school and the university have it on the same schedule, but as I recall, the university festival at the Koumei Institute is scheduled for the second half of October.

"Ah, it's gonna be fun, isn't it?"

I took a deep breath and thought so.

The atmosphere before a festival sure is nice. I had thought that unlike the university, the atmosphere of the attached high school was surprisingly lively, but that might have partly been due to the pre-festival excitement. At my university, most of the students don't even know the schedule of the festival, except for those who are eager to actively participate. Seeing the high school students here so excited in preparing for the school festival really delights a festival lover like me.

I heard the cheerful laughter of several students. A girl in a short skirt was slapping a boy on the shoulder and laughing boisterously.

--Ahh, Damn it all. I groaned at the precious time gone past.

Like my partner-in-crime from back home, Pei-chan often used to say. All boys should know the blessing of girls in uniform. There's no other environment in life where you'd have so many girls of the same age within arm's reach. Ahh, Pei-chan. It's just like you said. I should have enjoyed that precious time much more. I should have savored it much more. However, as I continued to regretfully watch the high school boys and girls working on the signs -- I suddenly realized.

Huh, now that I think about it…

Why is our school festival called 'The Mary Festival?'

That question brought back a dreadful memory. Didn't that come up in the story of Krishna-san's senpai who disappeared?

"…That's right."

If I remember correctly, it was something about artificially creating a Mary. The Mary in question, of course, being the famous mother of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary. Artificially creating that person? It doesn't make any sense. It would be one thing if it were about the resurrection of Christ the Messiah, so shouldn't it be the other way around?

"Speaking of which, didn't Sako also say something like that?"

Something about this institute being distorted since its foundation. Which was why it was helplessly distorted – and why there were so many suicides.

--Instead of directly confronting what happened…

--They just pretend it never happened, and repeatedly try to cover it up.

I recalled Sako's words one after another.

I felt a chill blow under my feet, and I stopped in my tracks.

Before I'd realized, the sports ground was spread out before my eyes, and I'd arrived at an old white building with the word 'Infirmary' written on it.

○

"…If you'll excuse me."

By the time I got out of the infirmary, I was exhausted as hell.

The infirmary doctor was a voluptuous glasses wearing young beauty with a large bust ---- As if, it was just a good-natured old man with white eyebrows so long they covered his eyes. His mumbling made

me wonder if he could understand me, but I asked him anyway. On the day Yoishi disappeared – the day before yesterday, did any female students visit him? I asked him only that much, but it took thirty minutes to get an answer out of him. His answer was that no students had come for quite a while now.

Feeling I'd reached a dead end, I was sitting on a bench next to the sports ground.

I took out my phone and checked, but still hadn't received any messages from Krishna-san or Yukihito-kun. I sighed, and put the phone back in my pocket.

Afterwards, I continued to gaze at the sports ground in a daze.

The grounds beyond the goalpost spread far and wide. Under the clear blue sky, a pleasant breeze blew past me. I stretch out my legs towards the wide-open space.

"Say, Yoishi…"

I muttered, as if asking the wind.

"Just where the hell did you disappear to? Everyone's worried about you, so why don't you show up already?"

Of course, muttering such things wouldn't make the situation any better.

There were a few students eating lunch on the distant benches, but maybe because it was still early in the lunch break, there was no one in the field. In a little while perhaps, it might be filled with people who liked playing soccer, basketball and other physical activities –

But… It really is vast.

Are sports grounds for a private school supposed to be this luxurious? I looked around once again, and noticed. Ahh, that's right. This is the equivalent of two grounds. The sports ground reserved for the high school, and the number two sports ground shared with the university – This large, vast space is the view of both combined.

And speaking about sports ground number two, there's that clock tower. I could barely see it from here, but just looking at the distant clock tower a.k.a gym equipment room, it sent a chill up my spine.

I recall the thing that peeked out of the hole of the clock tower dial back then. I recall that gaze I felt had followed me since then – that is to say, the gaze of that disappeared senpai – Ayana Takamura.

"Argh, just stop. Just stop thinking about it."

That's right, as I rubbed my knees in a panic –

All of a sudden, I felt a strange breeze. A lukewarm and unpleasant breeze. A stagnant air that blew from a closed place that hadn't been ventilated for years. The moment it hit my cheeks, I felt an unpleasant sweat trickle down my back.

Ahh, this is...

This is a feeling that I'd already experienced more than enough times. In the house that made me anxious, in the abandoned hospital in Hachioji, in the clock tower, in the room at dawn and the library – it wasn't so much of a feeling that something unworldly had mixed into the world I lived in, rather, it was more like I myself, had become mixed into another world, into something darker and extremely unsettling, into something that permeated from the world beyond.

"Say, did you know?"

All of a sudden, I hear a woman's voice, causing me to recoil in fear.

"There is a hole."

"…Huh?"

"Deep beneath the school. A large, vast, space exists. An immense cavern, said to be the remains of a wartime air-raid shelter, as well as

serving as a weapons depot for the former military of the Japanese empire.”

A young voice – but rather than a clear young girl’s voice, it sounded like that of a dignified young man.

Before I realized, that voice belonged to someone who was sitting besides me, but—

For some reason, I couldn’t bring myself to turn their way.

Sweat continued to run down my cheeks. The hands on my knees remained frozen, unable to move. No, I could still feel the strength in my fingertips. If I were to force them, they would, but I felt an invisible pressure from right next to me that seemed to forcibly block them in place.

“Up until now, no one has confirmed its existence, nor do we know if it really exists. Regardless, the rumor of its existence has continued to be spoken of in every era, without fail. The rumored existence of that hidden underground space has taken on a life of its own, and even now, continues to spew miasma at the world up above.”

I didn’t know who those words were directed at, but as they continued to be spoken, I barely managed to move my eyes in that direction. From the corner of my eyes, I caught a glimpse of the Koumei high school uniform, and a black skirt. And her thighs were white – as white as the belly of a dead fish. Was she a student from the affiliated high school? But from there, I just couldn’t look up to see her face.

“Why is it hidden, I wonder? Where is the entrance? And, why is the entrance sealed? Is it because entry is forbidden, or--?”

I imagined the rest of those words, and a shiver ran down my spine. That --- reminded me of what Yoishi had said in the clock tower.

『Say, why do you think the entrance was sealed?』

She asked me as we climbed the stairs of the clock tower.

『To keep people like you out, obviously.』 I answered, and she

shook her head in response, 『That's not it.』

Her dark colored eyes shone, as she declared:

--There's another purpose in keeping the entrance sealed.

--It's to keep whatever is present inside from getting out.

"Does the underground place exist, or not?"

Disregarding my presence – the girl in the corner of my vision continued muttering.

"If you think it's not there, it's not. If you think it is, then it is."

The wind turned cold. Even though the sun had been shining so brightly up until a while ago, it was now extremely cold. A penetrating cold enshrouds my feet.

"Did you see it, too?"

The girls' sudden question reverberates directly inside my head.

"That thing in the clock tower."

I shook my head vigorously in response to the cold, condescending voice.

--I didn't see it. I didn't see it at all.

I desperately whisper in my head, but I couldn't speak it out loud.

"What…did you see?"

Her voice echoed as it made my stomach tighten.

Back then, in that clock tower – I definitely did feel something. When the door of the second floor opened, I felt some kind of slimy presence pass by me. But that moment, Yoishi told me:

『Don't look.』

『Pretend not to notice.』

With that, I shut down my mind as quickly as I could. I blocked everything out so that I wouldn't perceive anything. I disconnected my conscious mind from everything. So, I didn't see it.

"…Hmm."

The girls voice rang out from somewhere.

"Well, that was lucky for you."

The ground was shaking – but I realized, that it was actually my own knees that were shaking.

And I finally became convinced.

The swallowing gaze pressing down on me from my right-hand side. A gaze with a seemingly voracious appetite, emanating from a parched presence akin to that of a summer haze. The owner of that gaze that gazed at me through the hole in the clock tower, through the cat, and the one that continued to gaze at me in recent times. That hole-like deep, dark void.

That was, at this moment, right next to me.

My body stiffened as my knees trembled with fear, I tried to hold them down with both hands, and meekly raised my voice, as if to escape the fear.

"W-who, are you….?"

The surrounding air trembled slightly. Did I hear laughter?

"T A K A M U R A."

Hearing the name as it danced in the wind and reached my ears –

I realized where I was.

It was dark there. There was only an endless darkness, clinging over everything. And then, I felt the fragments of the mystery that had

been slowly accumulating in my mind slowly coming together.

On that day in the club room, Yoishi had said it. She spoke of Krishna-san not being the subject of Ayana Takamura's experiment. In contrast, I had continued to feel someone's gaze since the clock tower incident. I was continually being gazed at from inside the cat, and I ended up being warned in the 'Rororo' incident by Kouhei Niijima, who had committed suicide. He had told me to run away, because I was being watched.

Ahh – I'm such an idiot, I finally realized it, after all this time.

I had been trying my best not to think about it because I was afraid -- but the 'answer' was suddenly right in front of me.

It was 'me' all along.

The subject of Ayana Takamura's experiment – was me.

What kind of experiment was it? And why me? I had no idea. In any case, there was an overwhelming darkness beside me. A blackness that had been extracted and concentrated many times over was right there. There was no doubt about it. The girl who had supposedly disappeared from this world five years ago – Ayana Takamura, had appeared right beside me. There was no way she was still alive. If she was alive, there was no way she would still be wearing the same uniform she was wearing five years ago. She wouldn't be giving off this rotten smell like she was now. If that was the case – then…

Was she a ghost?

But, despite the warning alarms that were going off in my shaken and confused brain, I barely managed to grasp something. This girl – just now, didn't she ask me, 'Did you see it, too? By 'too', she meant someone else…Did she mean Yoishi??

"Y-you—"

With that, the strength finally returned to my body. Mustering all my courage, I succeeded in making my vocal cords tremble once more.

"Do you know about Yoishi? Where Is she right now—"

The moment I asked, the girl chuckled quietly, and stood up. Being drawn in to her movement, I ended up moving my face up. And I saw it. The tall girl in the wind with her hands in her skirt pockets, staring off somewhere.

It – really was the girl from back then. The one who continued to gaze at me in the coffee shop, the same first year high schooler who was smiling in the picture with Krishna-san. As if she had experienced a five-year time slip, her shoulder-length hair danced in the wind, and she smiled slightly, her distinct white face like that of a westerner.

“U….”

I looked directly into her eyes, right into her smile, and I froze. I felt some something broken in her smile. It was as if she was trying to make another expression, but the muscles in her face wouldn't listen, and it ended up twisting into a smile. It was as if she was looking at me, and yet, it was as if she was not. It was as if her gaze had an eeriness that penetrated straight through me, at something beyond me.

But -- but, was this a ghost?

Does a ghost have clear expressions like this?

She had legs. The folds on her skirt were lined up just right.

She was definitely pale, and her presence was like that of a summer haze, but the texture of her flesh-and-blood body was one that you could reach out and touch.

--Was this really a ghost?

Eventually, the girl turned away.

She started walking by herself towards the school building. I yelled out to her: ‘Hey!'

“Wait. What about Yoi—”

The girl stopped a few steps away, and slowly looked back.

She turned her pale white face towards me, and her dark, deep black eyes spoke as if to say.

“She… is no longer alive.”

3.

“Ahh, Nagito-kun.”

Yukihito Kurimoto-kun was there alone on the emergency stairs of the special lab building. He smiled cheerfully and raised his hand as he greeted me.

“...Hey.”

“You don’t look well. Are you alright?”

“I guess.”

It was a lie. To tell the truth, my nausea and shivering wouldn’t stop.

I didn't really understand what had just occurred in the school grounds.

“It seems Nee-san still hasn’t arrived.”

Yukihito-kun muttered and stared at the dense area that was behind the special lab building.

I'm still not sure when the conversation ended with the creepy tall girl in the schoolyard who tossed me around like I was in a storm. At any rate, I snapped back to reality when I heard a familiar ringing sound. It was my cell phone, notifying me of an incoming text message from Krishna-san.

With that, I finally realized there was no one around me. The girl who, up until then, had been whispering incomprehensible things to me was nowhere to be seen.

Krishna-san’s message was brief:

《There’s a few things I want to report. Wait for me at the emergency

staircase of the special lab building.》

After reading her message, I staggered my way here.

I sat down in silence on the emergency stairs, when Yukihito-kun began to speak:

“I didn’t really find any leads in the staff room. I tried asking a teacher I’m on good terms with in a roundabout way but it seems they still have no idea about Miturugi-san’s whereabouts. I got the impression that they weren't taking the search very seriously.”

“Is that so?”

“Also, I realized something while I was looking at the pictures we took in the classroom, she normally doesn't seem to have anything in her bag. In short, she doesn’t have any problems leaving her bags here before going home. That’s why it’s not farfetched to think that Mitsurugi-san went home, but... “

“Yeah, right.”

I replied in a stupor, and picked up a cigarette butt that lay at my feet.

I see, this place is certainly out of sight. It was completely cut off from the main school building, and would probably be a place where delinquents would often gather. In front of the stairs was the backyard of the special lab building, and the only thing beyond the unkempt looking hedge was an old fence. I flicked the cigarette butt with my finger and let out a sigh.

“Nagito-san, is something the matter?”

“Ah, no.”

Up until now, I hadn't been seriously concerned about Yoishi’s disappearance. It wasn’t my place to lay blame on the teachers. In fact, my pride in having dealt with her on a different level than the teachers ended up making me accept that her disappearance was a normal thing. The idea of Yoishi wandering into a place where people

definitely shouldn't go to -- I was arrogant enough to think that there was no one in the world who would more naturally accept that than me. But now, with the emergence of the girl named 'Takamura', a dark cloud slowly enshrouds itself over my head.

--Ayana Takamura.

Krishna-san's senpai, who disappeared suddenly five years ago.

A crazy girl who could see ghosts and left behind countless taboo words on campus.

Was that Takamura, in fact Ayana Takamura? No, there's no denying it. So, is that it, then? Have I really become able to see ghosts? Have I really have stepped into the world Yoishi and Sako reside in?

『Does the underground place exist, or not?』

『Did you see it, too?』

『That thing in the clock tower.』

That girl's words were completely befuddling. And because they were befuddling, they scared me. It felt as if she was completely oblivious to my emotions, my position, and my very existence. There was an overwhelming sense of dread, as if a higher biological being was looking down on an insect.

And the last thing she said—

『She… is no longer alive.』

Did that mean that Yoishi was already dead? Did Yoishi, having seen that thing inside the clock tower, end up disappearing because of that? There were too many things I didn't know, there was too little information to go on – my head couldn't process it at all.

Thereupon, the afternoon bell rang out loudly.

"…Huh?"

--That's right, I thought I heard a school bell on the way here. And with that, I was finally brought back to my senses.

"Yukihito-kun, will it be alright if you don't attend your classes?"

"That's right…"

Yukihito-kun smiled as if it didn't concern him, and simply said:

"It's more interesting to be present here right now."

But – I shook my head vigorously, and retorted straight away:

"Just stop."

"…"

"It would be better if you don't involve yourself in this incident any more than you already have. And don't get involved with Yoishi anymore."

Yukihito-kun looked straight at me with a calm and collected expression – Argh, I ruffled my hair. Wasn't that exactly what Krishna-san had been telling me, over and over again? But I wound up ignoring her anyway. I knew better than anyone that unless you realized the seriousness of involving yourself with the world beyond, such words would not have a shred of persuasive power.

"No, actually, let me start off by saying that Yoishi is not a bad person. But, because of some circumstances, she's different from us. The place she stands and the things she sees, are completely different. To involve yourself with her is to involve yourself with the things she sees."

"By that, do you mean to say ghosts?"

Being asked in return, I suddenly lost my tongue. I was hesitant to say anything about ghosts to an innocent high school freshman. Aside from the embarrassment of being thought of as a denpa college student, the existence of ghosts itself was still too vague in my mind. I couldn't definitively explain their existence in certain terms, so I kept silent, when Yukihito-kun asked me:

“Nagito-san, what’s the relationship between you and Mitsurugi-san?”

“Relationship?”

“I mean, the girl who’s cut off from everyone else in class, I can’t imagine that she would be involved with a university student like you in so many ways, Nagito-san.”

“Well, it’s not that I’m involved, it’s more like I ended up becoming involved…. It's not like we're particularly close. I mean, it’s only recently that I got her contact info.”

Saying that out loud, I suddenly remembered.

Since I’d learned of Yoishi’s disappearance, I’d been intermittently trying to call her, but I couldn’t get through to her phone.

“Ah, wait a minute.”

I took out my phone and tried calling Yoishi again.

After it rang for several seconds, I got the intercept message.

The one that says the number you’re trying to reach is out of range, or the phone is turned off. Clicking my tongue, I cut off the call, when I realized I had one voice mail. Huh? Even though there was no incoming call? I pondered as I quickly tried to call the voicemail center.

《…You have one message. The message was sent at 2:37 a.m.》

2 am? Why so late?

--My thoughts were suddenly interrupted.

《…Hello.》

That nostalgic voice, as if it rang a bell, made me sit up straight.

I unintentionally ended up shouting “Yoishi?!” out loud, causing Yukihito-kun to lean in close as well.

But after that, I couldn't hear her clearly because her voice was

muffled and too quiet. I could hear her mumbling something over the phone, but I couldn't make out what she was saying. I desperately pushed my ear against the phone, and covered my other ear with my free hand. I focused my complete and utter attention to Yoishi's whispering voice.

《I am….ere.. But…. what should… *Zaza* ... I think…"》

Did the lines get crossed up somewhere? The static was crazy.

"Hey, where are you right now? Are you still alive?"

Completely unable to understand her, I stupidly tried asking the voicemail in a panic.

And the last few words I barely managed to make out were--

《Don't look for me.》

That was the last thing she said.

I immediately operated my phone and played it again from the beginning. But no matter how many times I listened, I couldn't pick up anything else from the recording. The only clear line was at the end, 'Don't look for me.'

"Was it really Mitsurugi-san?"

I saved the message and hung up, and nodded towards the worried looking Yukihito-kun.

I was sure of it now.

There was no room for doubt anymore. She was caught up in something. That creepy girl from earlier was also involved, and despite Yoishi being quite shrewd when it came to ghosts, the situation had become a little too much for her to handle. At any rate, she's trapped somewhere. The question was: where, exactly? And was there anything we could we do about it?

Thereupon, A voice suddenly called out to me: "Sorry to keep you waiting."

I looked up to see Krishna-san standing there, carrying numerous old notebooks in both hands, looking somber as ever.

“What is that?”

Without answering Yukihito-kun’s inquiry, Krishna-san took a single, deep sigh.

“It’s about Yoishi, you’d better prepare yourself for the worst.”

“…Huh?”

“We might never see her again.”

“Nee-san, calm down.”

At Yukihito-kun's words, Krishna-san shouted back.

“How the hell can I calm down?! Of all the people – Of all the people, I can’t believe I'm going to have to deal with that person again… It's nothing but a nightmare.”

“By that person—do you really mean…?”

When I asked, Krishna-san nodded painfully, then with a thud, slammed down the stack of notebooks on the stairs.

“I don't even know where to begin - no, I have to tell you everything, but before that...”

Saying that, she sits down on the stairs a few steps below me and looks up at me.

“You said you met Yoishi a few times after you got back to Tokyo.”

“…Y…yes.”

“Where did you two meet? Or rather, where did you two go to?”

“…U…uhhhh.”

“I’m not going to get angry. The situation isn’t like that anymore. So

be honest and tell me everything from the beginning."

To that silent, but firm tone of voice, I nodded and told her everything.

About what happened with Yoishi at the 'clock tower'. About the unknown presence I felt back then. And how, I was entrusted with my friend's cat (or how I believed it to be my friend). How Yoishi had talked about there having been something inside the cat. How I picked up the strange note. How the guy who wrote it was already dead at the time, and how Sako asked me to look for the book called 'Rororo' in the library at night. How I saw countless somethings back then.

And furthermore --- how I'd recently been feeling someone's gaze around me.

I somehow felt that gaze belonged to that girl I met just now, but for some reason, I couldn't speak of that. The fact that the girl called herself 'Takamura' -- it was something I just couldn't speak out loud. It was probably the last remaining defense instinct within me. I couldn't help but feel that If I were to speak it out loud, that girl might appear right beside me once more.

After my long, long confession was finally over, Krishna-san let out a deep sigh and nodded.

"I see, so that's what happened."

For a while afterwards, Krishna-san held her breath in as if she were desperately trying to swallow something bitter. She seemed to be gathering a large amount of determination to speak, something I'd never seen her do before. Eventually, with a mutter, she began.

"Is a virgin birth possible?"

"…Huh?"

"…Eh?"

Yukihito-kun and I asked one after the other. Krishna-san proceeded

to narrate quietly:

“The woman known as Mary of Nazareth became pregnant with Jesus, the Messiah, while still a virgin. There is little disagreement about this fact among Christians, who now number more than two billion in the world. But the question is, why did Mary have to be a virgin?”

“….Ermmm.”

I didn’t know where she was going with this, but I pulled out an answer from my half-assed knowledge.

“As I recall, Joseph and Mary were engaged, so until they were officially married, uh ..... their relationship, I think, was platonic.”

“That’s not it.” Krishna-san shook her head.

“Who in the modern world can comprehend the circumstances of a couple that lived more than two-thousand years ago? Why did Mary have to be a virgin? It’s because she had to give birth to Jesus Christ. Because she was the mother of the messiah, she had to be a virgin. Because the father of the grand messiah could not be a human. Well, let’s leave it at that. There are many opinions in comparative religions on this matter, but to go too deep into it would take us away from the subject. But you see, the problems that are happening in this school right now all started with Mary's virginity.”

I suddenly remembered.

---The Mary festival. Artificially creating a Mary—

“Could that be….”

“That’s right. In the past, there was a sect of the Marian faith that thought that in order to create a savior in this world again, it would be best to nurture a new Mary. And there are visible traces of that religious group's involvement in the founding of this school.”

Saying that Krishna-san picked up one of the notes at her feet and opened a page. She continued the story as she read aloud.

“To begin with, Mary of Nazareth was canonized as the holy mother in the Niceno- Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 A.D.[11]However, as Christian missionaries spread to various parts of the world, there was a period where the interpretation of Mary began to differ. Mary of Nazareth began to take on a type of divinity of her own as the woman who gave birth to Jesus. It is widely believed that the Virgin Mary was used to absorb the remaining mother-goddess worship in various parts of Europe, and this is where one of the Catholic branches, a sect involved in the founding of this school, was born. They devotedly believed, sometimes fanatically, that the divinity of Jesus was inherited from Mary, and that to incarnate the savior again, his mother had to be created first. Their influence gradually grew far and wide, until their beliefs were eventually labelled as heresy by the Vatican, causing their decline - What happened to them from there onwards is unknown. But the few surviving leaders came to this island country far away from Europe. It must have been a very convenient country for them. Japan was in the midst of the Meiji Restoration at the time, and was taking in a mixture of the good and the bad from the west.”

“Is that what that bastard Sako meant when he said this school was distorted since its foundation?” I groaned, and Yukihito-kun, who had been listening quietly until then, began to speak.

“Nee-san, what traces of their involvement in the founding of this school are you referring to?”

“The biographies of the people recorded as co-founders, the contents of the moral textbooks of the time, the wording of the founding texts that deviated from Vatican doctrine -- there are many things that could be considered traces of Marian worship, but… I suppose the easiest one to understand would be the school building.”

“…The school building?”

“If you were to look at the whole institute from overhead, you would quickly understand – Don’t you think it closely resembles something?”

“…Huh?”

Yukihito-kun and I looked at each other in confusion, which prompted Krishna-san to speak.

“Is it so difficult for boys to understand?”

Krishna-san took a notebook out of her pocket, and drew up a simple map of the school with a ball-point pen.

“See, do you get it now? The school gate is the vulva. The entrance forms the vagina. The main school building is the cervix, and the gym is the womb. If you look at it from a bird's eye view, it resembles a woman's body.”

“….Oh.”

“Indeed, nowhere in the official records of this school is there any mention of creating Mary as being the purpose behind this school’s creation. Now that the school has been remade as a co-educational school, the buildings have been rebuilt and expanded. But don't you notice when you walk around this school? Why is it so hard to get to where you want to go? Even to get to the special lab building which is only a few dozen meters away from the classrooms, you have to leave the school building and take a long detour around the flower beds.”

--That’s right, I just wanted to head to the infirmary from the main school building a while ago, but I ended up in a dead end three times. A distance of less than five meters in a straight line, and yet I was forced to take a detour many times.

“That's because this entire building is designed to emphasize the spiritual path over the human one.”

“…Spiritual path?”

“Yes. In the first place, a spiritual path is not a path that shows humans the way to do things, but something that is naturally created in places where spirits can easily pass through. The spirits that pass through them vary from the souls of the dead to vengeful spirits, but generally, it’s said that once you pass through, you can never come back. But what would happen if we were to loop it? What if we were

to deliberately construct a structure in which ghosts are naturally guided by water, mirrors, and other devices that have a certain effect on their behavior? What if all of the buildings were arranged to gather countless thoughts in one place, and the school was built solely to produce an artificial Mary with overwhelming divinity?”

--A fool.

A fool among fools, is what I thought from the bottom of my heart. No, people's foolishness was and still is, very much the same, and it might be that people have come this far after being disgusted by such stupidity, but this was indeed too much.

“At any rate…”

Krishna-san took off her glasses and started wiping them with a handkerchief while wearing a seemingly sad expression.

“It's an extremely old story from the past. So I don't know what the truth is. But Takamura-senpai seemed to have realized the truth behind the structure of this institute. No, perhaps the truth behind the rumor never mattered to her. She tried to use the structure of this school building to achieve something that she wanted. As far as I can tell from this note, senpai reconnected the spiritual paths that had been cut off by the structural expansion and renovation, and laid out taboo words around the school that amplified negative thoughts to compensate for the enthusiasm and liveliness of the students.”

“That senpai called Takamura – she sounds a bit dangerous.”

Krishna-san smiled quietly and put her glasses back on in response to Yukihito-kun.

“That’s right. Now when I think on it, that’s exactly it. But back then, it was unthinkable. She was so dignified and beautiful, that you couldn’t even say it out loud if you had noticed something -- Generally speaking, she had a strong presence, like she was the sun of the school. But that sun was also a pale blue moon at the same time. What she wrote in her letter: ‘Kotodama hide even more amazing potential.’ That line scares me. What was she trying to do? What was she trying to do with the unique structure of this school? In the past,

Senpai once told me that she didn't want to give birth to a flesh and blood child. Then, what exactly is a child that is not made of flesh and blood?"

"Krishna-san." I interjected.

"How exactly does that relate to Yoishi's disappearance?"

Krishna-san took out a particularly worn-out college notebook from the many different ones she had in response.

"This is the first draft for the quarterly magazine from the literature club, in other words, a rough draft. In it, there's a description that follows as such: The clock tower forms the phallus, and the gymnasium forms the womb."

"Phallus?"

The baby-faced occult site manager blushed in reply.

"D-don't make me say it. It's about the male genitals. In short, Senpai seemed to have regarded the structure of this school as a sexual union between a male and a female."[12]

"No—just wait a minute. By clock tower, you mean that thing, right? The gym storage building in the number two sports ground?"

"That's right, it's the earthen storehouse you and Yoishi went to."

"Ah…."

"Having previously done research on it with the research division of Ikaigabuchi, I already knew that it was originally an earthen storehouse. I'd been asking the school authorities to stop using that building for a long time now, but to no avail. Even though the characteristic of that building more closely resembles an Edo period jail than an earthen storehouse."

That means the ghost story Karasu-san mentioned surrounding the clock tower really was true after all. And the way Krishna-san was speaking about it, I guess it really was an S-ranked haunted place.

“I don’t know about it being an S-ranked place or anything.” Krishna-san spoke indignantly. “I just deleted it because it was safer not to go there. There's an elderly person in there who doesn't even realize that they’re dead. Supposedly a woman. Anyway, she has strong feelings of resentment against her son and his wife, and on the other hand, she strongly blames herself. She hopes to die quickly, and so, repeatedly tries to kill herself. There is a mechanism in the clock tower that can make a small hole appear on the clock face, where she sticks her face out. The minute hand passes through that hole at regular intervals. And precisely at that time, witnesses accounts state that blood rains down around the clock tower. Some also witness something resembling a head falling down.”

Thereupon, I asked timidly: “I- I felt that when I was there with Yoishi. And Yoishi said that there was one more person in there…”

“…Yes, that’s right. This is nothing more than conjecture: But let’s assume that other person was Senpai – let’s assume that there’s nothing meaningless in her actions. That brings to mind this sentence about the clock tower as a male organ. Senpai had noticed that the high school buildings of the Koumei Institute were made to look like female genitalia. She planned to gather countless thoughts in one place by planting taboo words there. That was foiled by Senpai’s disappearance, but - if there’s still something in this school that used to be Senpai, it wouldn’t be strange to assume that she's trying to continue with her plans. And Yoishi Mitsurugi – is a girl who can who can see all of that, all of those things that we can only imagine.”

“…You mean to tell me that... that Yoishi was trying to stop her, and something happened to her?”

“The only thing I can do is make logical deductions. Senpai was able to see things that people must never see. She saw everything, things that would have been better left unseen. Yoishi Mitsurugi is, no doubt, the same. The amount of information they have on this world is overwhelmingly different than us. Naturally, that means the foundation of their thinking is different. It’s not something a normal person can understand. That’s what leads me to believe that Yoishi must have seen the path Senpai ended up taking. It leads me to believe… that Yoishi might have ended up at the same place Senpai is.”

“Where…is that?”

I asked hoarsely, prompting Krishna-san to feebly shake her head.

“I don't think I'll ever know where that is.”

She proceeded to silently rephrase herself.

“No—I’m sure those living in this world aren’t supposed to know where that is.”

Those words echoed in the emergency staircase, and quietly faded away.

While classes were in session, we were hidden in the shadows of another high school building. The unusualness of the situation seemed to embody the world that the girl named Ayana Takamura walks. And it seemed to ooze from the shadows created by the sun, depriving us of all words.

“—But you know.”

Eventually, Krishna-san slowly raised her head.

“Senpai once told me: 『Kurimoto-san, I might have been wrong. The real womb of this school might not be the gymnasium after all. 』”

“The real… womb?”

The air around me grew heavier.

“That’s right, Senpai said… 『Does the place underground exist, or not?』”

4.

I was in a daze for a while.

In the end, after discussing what the best course of action would be, we decided to search for Yoishi once more in the evening. It would be conspicuous to wander around the school during class time, so we had to kill some time on the emergency staircase until the end of class – However, I had the feeling no one really had any hope of finding Yoishi anymore.

Krishna-san and Yukihito-kun both had their heads drooped down in silence, and I, being me, was confused, as if I was drowning in the myriad of information.

Just what was the underground space? If it was the womb, then what did it have to do with Yoishi's whereabouts? In the first place, what did artificially creating a Mary actually mean? And who exactly was the girl I met on the bench who called herself 'Takamura'? Was that really the so-called Senpai who disappeared abruptly five years ago? Does that mean what I saw was her ghost?

That tall high school girl was most definitely wearing this high school's uniform. And now that I think about it, she was supposed to have been younger than me, but her presence gave the impression that she was much older. She looked exactly the same as she did in the photo with her and Krishna-san five years ago, and yet, she hadn't aged at all.

But, if that really was Ayana Takamura's ghost –

Then an undeniable truth presents itself before me.

That I, without realizing, had become a person who was able to see ghosts. In short, I already had more than a foot plunged into the world beyond. To acknowledge that fact, or to speak it out loud, was

unbearably scary. As a result, I couldn't even bear to tell Krishna-san of the fact that I had seen such a girl.

In the house that made me anxious, In the abandoned hospital of Hachioji, in the clock tower, and in the library. I felt I'd seen something resembling a ghost in all of them. But I could dismiss them all as phantoms borne from my delirious mind. I could protect my sanity by telling myself that they were phantoms borne from fear. But a while ago, was I really delirious? No, I was in a normal state of mind, searching for Yoishi; When unawares, that woman appeared besides me. And just by closing my eyes and remembering, I can easily picture that girl's white face, her short hairstyle, and even the wrinkles of her uniform. I could even clearly recall her voice in my ear. That wasn't a dream, nor a phantom. Then, that was… a real ghost after all?

The heavy atmosphere that covered the entire school.

The atmosphere I felt… about everything ending before it had even begun.

I had a feeling that I knew what it was, and my stomach felt endlessly heavy.

How could something like this happen in modern society? One student - or two counting the similar cases in the past - had disappeared, and yet, the school refuses to act? What about the police? Or to put it more broadly, the adults. No, they can't move. As long as people are people, and because of the unconscious acknowledgement and fear of a malevolent god that runs deep in the genes of the Japanese people, they are prevented from doing so. Two girls disappeared. They disappeared suddenly and without warning on a certain day. Sako said it: That this private institute was managed by a financial conglomerate. And furthermore, there was a religious group involved as well. That's why things don't come out in the open.

--It's closed off.

I recalled the murky atmosphere that covered this school.

This place is inescapably closed off. It's self-contained, with only the

outward appearance kept presentable. That was the truth behind the sense of confinement that I had felt. The temperament of the people of this country, which seals off all sad events as taboos, and pretends they never happened, was specialized in this school in a different form.

“—Nagi-kun?”

Hearing my name called suddenly, I looked up in a start.

“Are you alright?”

I realized Krishna-san was peering into my face.

“…I’m fine.”

No, I wasn’t fine at all. But I felt like if I didn’t answer that way, I’d really feel like crap, so I said it intentionally.

“I just called Sako Takita-san.”

Krishna-san held up her phone.

“I told him about Yoishi. He'll join us as soon as he finishes his business.”

Krishna-san said that, but I clicked my tongue and stood up.

“That guy's useless.”

I don't know why Krishna-san rated him so highly, but that guy was undoubtedly dangerous. At least, that's how I saw him. To start with, if Yoishi hadn’t shown up in the library that night, those countless somethings would have been called down on me. There was no way I could trust him.

“Nagi-kun, where are you going?”

“To the guard post at the main gate. “

“I’m going to ask them if there’s place underground.”

“Krishna-san didn’t say anything after that.

I strode out to the high school courtyard, crossing the campus which was crowded with students on their way home or heading to club activities after class. So many high school students are laughing, but this school is still wearing a mask. Is this school going to continue to operate like this, pretending that nothing bad happened, without properly settling the past?

And that went for me as well. I was trying to pretend that I didn't see Yoishi. Even though I had gotten involved with her so much, even though I narrowly escaped death thanks to her so many times, and yet, I still couldn't help but be scared, and ran away. I had ended up deciding not to associate with her anymore.

Inside the guard post across the main gate, there were two guards.

One of them was a young guy about the same age as me. The other had gray streaks in his hair.

I asked the one with the gray hairs:

"Is there an underground place in this school?"

"Huh?"

"I heard a rumor saying there's an underground place in this school, is it really true?"

The older security guard took a glance at the 'Koumei Academy Newspaper Club' armband I had left on my arm, and nodded in acknowledgment.

"That kind of rumor has been around for a long time. I've been hearing it since the time I was assigned here. Something about it being an underground air-raid shelter during the war, and about it being used a morgue when this place was turned into a hospital during the war."

The guard laughs it off as he narrates the rumors.

"Then, what is the place really like?"

"No, no, it's nothing like that. It's just a boiler room."

“Is it a big boiler room?”

“No, it’s only big enough to fit a boiler. Five people couldn’t fit in there.”

“Can I see inside?”

The gray-haired security guard sunk into silence. He exchanged a glance with the younger guard besides him.

“No, entry is only allowed for administrative staff.” The younger guard spoke.

“Please let me in there. One of the students has disappeared, and we’re searching for her right now.”

Ahh, the old guard nods his head.

“You mean that first-year girl, right? Yesterday we were informed by the school and we searched for her everywhere. That includes the underground boiler room, of course. But we didn’t find anyone down there.”

“Please check there once again.” I bowed my head.

“The chances that she went there is high. Please search there once again. And let me accompany you as well.”

From behind me I hear, “Please let us”, as Krishna-san and Kurimoto-kun both lowered their heads at the same time as me.

In the end—

It was just like how the guards had described it: a simple boiler room.

There were a few other places that resembled something like baggage store rooms, but there was no sign of Yoishi in any of them. To the annoyance of the young guard, we searched and tapped around the walls everywhere, but there didn’t seem to be any hidden entrances anywhere. There was no sign that a place deeper underground existed any more than that level. I mean, we weren’t structural

engineers or anything, so we couldn't say for sure.

We said our thanks to the guard, and by the time we got back up to the surface, it was already pretty dark outside.

All a sudden, Kurimoto-kun's cell phone started ringing.

"Hello."

Yukihito-kun answered the phone, when I saw his expression change quickly.

"…Really? Are you sure?"

"What's wrong?"

Krishna-san also straddled up close—

After eventually hanging up the phone, Yukihito-kun informed us it was from a friend.

"They found a pair of shoes on the roof. They seem to be the indoor shoes of a girl."

○

"Hey, get back!"

"All you kids, get out of here!"

The teachers were shouting angrily on the roof.

And from their voices, I could tell that all the adults were exceptionally perturbed.

We pushed aside the countless onlookers until we managed to make our way through to the front. Apparently, the pair of shoes were found on top of the water tower facility at the far end of the school building. They had been discovered lined up when the workers were about to carry out a routine inspection. There were already a few

gym teachers who had climbed on top of the water tower and were starting at something. Beneath them were about ten or so teachers all lined up, talking amongst themselves and stopping any students who tried to approach.

“Hey! Whose shoes are those?!”

I shouted out loud, and the teacher standing in the front shouted back at me telling me to ‘shut up’. He told me to back off right away, and pushed me back. I managed to overhear the teachers talking amongst themselves, they were wondering why the police had arrived yet.

“Stop fucking kidding me, let me through.”

“I told you to back off!”

I was in the middle of arguing back and forth with the biggest, bamboo sword wielding, jersey-wearing gym teacher of the bunch, when Krishna-san slipped out from beside me and dashed past the teachers.

“H-hey you!”

While the gym teachers were all focused on Krishna-san, I also made a mad dash through.

I pushed past the teachers to reach Krishn-san's side, and together we peeked at the other side of the water tower -- which was, empty space, that is -- and looked down the school building from the railing there.

For a split second, I thought I saw Yoishi’s fallen body far down in the depths below.

In an instant, a strange nostalgia sweeps over my heart. A feeling that made me want to burst into tears, that made me nostalgic for the days when I went to creepy places with Yoishi, and got teary-eyed at her words.

--Don’t be there. Please don’t be there.

I prayed, as I peered downwards.

And in the next moment – I let out a deep breath.

Looking down at the hedges from the roof, there was no one to be seen. With the sun already begun to set, it was difficult to see in places, but there was still no sign of a corpse. Only the dreary expanse full of weeds lay spread out.

“Hey!”

“…Ouch.”

A thick arm extended towards me and pulled me back, pinioning my arms behind me.

Krishna-san was also grabbed by a different teacher and was pulled back.

“I told you not to come here you fools!”

I was instantly dragged back to the crowd of onlookers together with Krishna-san. We then exchanged glances and spoke at the same time: “Yoishi wasn’t there.”

“…I mean, it’s best that her body wasn’t there, but what does it mean?”

“Leaving aside the fact of whether or not the shoes belong to Yoishi – for now, it just means that the girl who jumped from the roof is nowhere to be found. It might just be a malicious prank set up by someone.”

The next moment, I caught a glimpse of a teacher in a shirt putting the shoes in a plastic bag and climbing down from the water tower.

I shouted out once more.

“Hey, just let me take a look at those shoes! They might belong to someone I know!”

The teacher sent an annoyed glance our way – when he noticed the

‘Newspaper club’ armbands we were wearing, and after that, he annoyedly held up the shoes up for us to see. From what I could see from here, there was neither a name or class written on them. You’re actually supposed to write that down on them, but there were probably very few high schoolers who bothered to do that anymore.

“How were they placed, exactly?”

The balding teacher replied to Krishna-san’s question:

“They were placed together. Judging from the size, I’m guessing they belong to a girl.”

Then muttered afterwards as if continuing.

“…But, it’s strange. They were placed facing inwards.”

---Inwards?

But the teacher who reacted to those words, was a tall, elderly one who stood in the center.

I would later learn from Yukihito-kun that he was the vice-principal of this high school.

I heard his voice unmistakably tremble as he spoke in a whisper:

“…Isn’t that…exactly the same as five years ago?”

--Five years ago.

In an instant, I looked towards Krishna-san.

The occult website manager, had her lips pursed tightly together.

Past six pm, around the time when students who had finished their club activities were heading home—

Me, Krishna-san and Yukihito-kun were standing in front of the main gate.

With its siren turned off, only the flashing lights atop the patrol car kept spinning round and round, bewitchingly illuminating the school building, which appeared black enshrouded in the darkness. At long last, it seemed the school had finally contacted the police. From here on, they would investigate whether the shoes belonged to Yoishi, and if that were proved, they would conclude that she had been involved in some kind of incident, and officially begin a manhunt.

"…Let's come again tomorrow."

Krishna-san sounded completely exhausted, to which neither I nor Yukihito-kun could reply.

The light from the staff room was still brightly visible. From here on, the teachers were probably going to be thoroughly interrogated by the police as to why they were so late in reporting a student's disappearance. I didn't feel any sympathy with them, but I also didn't get the feeling that Yoishi's disappearance would be solved now that the police were involved.

"Why did the vice-principal say it was the same as five years ago?"

Yukihito-kun muttered silently.

"Who knows?"

Krishna-san looked as if she had gulped down something bitter, and shook her head.

"But judging from what the vice principal said and the way he reacted on the roof, it seems that when Senpai disappeared, her shoes were also found at the same place. I didn't know about it at the time, but that's where the rumors of a suicide spread from, even though her body was never found."

"…Do those shoes belong to Yoishi?"

I asked, but Krishna-san shook her head once more.

"Let's leave that up to the police investigation. For now, let's return to the university club room. There's nothing we can do right now. Takita-san is also supposed to come here soon -- I'll stay in the club

room on standby, you guys return home for today.”

“….Eh?”

“No way sis, I’m staying, I can’t just leave like this…”

“Didn’t I say it already? There’s nothing we can do right now. Takita-san is looking into Senpai’s disappearance five years ago. Until we can hear his opinion on it, we probably won't find anything. We have even less information when it comes to Yoishi.”

Those words made me recall the voice mail I had received from Yoishi. I took out my phone once more, and tried to replay the message I had saved in the afternoon.

But--

《You have no messages.》…Was the message displayed on the screen.

“…Huh? What?”

Did I delete it? No, that can’t be. I was sure I had properly saved it. Seeing me fiddle with my phone, Yukihito-kun asked me.

“The message isn’t there?”

“What are you two talking about?”

In reply to Krishna-san’s query, I quickly explained to her that I had received a voice message from Yoishi.

“…A voice message? From Yoishi? Are you sure?”

“Yes, because of some interference, I couldn’t quite make out what she was saying – but the one thing I’m sure I heard her say was: ‘Don’t look for me.’”

Hearing that, Krishna-san placed a hand on her small chin and seemed to be lost in thought –

Finally, she placed her hand gently on my shoulders.

“For the time being, let’s return to the club room. We’ll think things over from there.”

We passed by the grounds as we made our way to the western club room building.

The two sports grounds lined together had their lights turned off, their vast space was akin to a bottomless sea of darkness. The only thing that proved it was there was the feeling of the hard ground beneath our feet, as we walked on the faintly visible surface. But right now, I couldn’t even trust that that feeling. It wouldn’t be out of the ordinary for the hardness of this ground to collapse at any moment.

I recalled the past, a time I had spent with my father rowing out to the sea at night, fishing for cuttlefish. The sea at night scared me. No matter where you looked, darkness reigned; the boundary between the sky and the sea was indiscernible. Only the stars in the overhead sky remained, a world drenched in darkness lay underneath. And there, my father and I were swaying. We were swaying in a small boat used for fishing. it was scary to not talk, but my father didn’t talk at all when he was absorbed in fishing. Only the strong aroma of the sea and the rough sound from the waves remained. In that series of sounds, I felt like I could hear someone’s voice. A sad voice; A voice on the verge of insanity, desperately wishing for something that it knew it could never gain. As I listened to it, I wondered if I was going to melt away. Surrounded by a bottomless darkness from top to bottom, I was scared that I would melt away.

And now—

After a long time, I recalled the horror of that time, the fact that nature did not care the least about my existence. You can’t see the stars in the Tokyo sky, but I had the feeling that something vast was stretching out beneath the vast expanse of the ground.

『Does the underground place exist, or not?』

The girl I saw -- ‘Takamura’, had said that.

『If you think it's not there, it's not. If you think it is, then it is. 』

She also said that.

In short, which one was it? It was all too abstract, a dumb person like me couldn't get it at all.

And it was just like – the existence of ghosts. If you think they're there, they're there, and yet, the countless ghost stories beloved by the world are completely laughable to those who don't believe in them. But that ambiguity… is good. To get to the bottom of that ambiguity is no good, that would not be the kind of occult I'd like. It would be fine if I knew the truth after I died. As long as I was still alive, I didn't want to know it. Yeah, those were my thoughts on it. For me, the occult was always a romance. If it stops being exciting, it's no longer a romance, and I am not that broken. Or should I say, I should not have been broken. I should have been like Krishna-san, an existence that paid respect to the other side from afar, with my feet firmly planted in this world.

However—

I had only come to think this way because of Yoishi. If she hadn't intervened in the depths of my dream back then, I would have been destroyed along with the collapse of that mansion. I'm only here alive and well because she was there for me back then.

Suddenly, I stopped in my tracks.

In a row of zelkova trees near the western club room building, I turned to look back.

In the darkness beyond, I could vaguely see the Koumei affiliated high school. Yukihito-kun had said it in the beginning, but now, I too felt that Yoishi was still somewhere inside that school. Somewhere out of everyone's sight, she was caught up in an inescapable situation, yet still trying to endure everything with a pained expression on her face. Her power of endurance was completely abnormal. Without a doubt, she would continue to sit silently, without asking anyone for help, until her body rotted away. Just like she had done up until now, she would walk a painful path alone for

over a thousand years, without anyone's sympathy.

"Krishna-san."

I spoke.

"…Hm?"

Walking ahead of me, The Kurimoto siblings turned to face me at the same time.

"I'm gonna try looking around a bit more."

"Where?"

"I don't know – but somewhere."

"Just stop. If you insist, then I'll come with you as well."

"No, let me look for her by myself. It's alright, don't worry. If I just leave like this, I'll regret it for the rest of—"

I shook my head, and rephrased myself.

"I'll be filled with regret even after I die, to the point where I might end up as a ghost." I declared, and ran back to the heart of darkness by myself.

○

The patrol car was still parked in front of the high school gates.

However, there was no sign of the police nearby. Nor of any students. The lights were still switched on in the staff room, probably because they were still being interrogated about the situation.

As if slipping into the darkness, I headed towards the entrance. As I reached there, I thought to change into the slippers reserved for guests, but since my current shoes would be useful if I had to escape, I regretfully decided to enter the school building with my own shoes.

Despite saying that I would look for Yoishi, I didn't have the faintest clue where to start looking, but on my way back here, my mind was made up. The rooftop. The last place she had been in.

I ran up the stairs, trying to make as little noise as possible. Passing through the second, third, fourth floor — I arrived at the top. The iron door that led to the rooftop was covered with yellow tape and a sign that read, 'Usage forbidden'.

"…Is this even necessary? It's not like someone's dead yet."

Grumbling to myself, I stepped under the tape, twisted the key and opened the door. I slid through the door and unto the rooftop in the night.

A nice breeze was blowing across the pitch-dark rooftop.

I closed the door, put my hands in my pockets and walked on alone.

Naturally, there was not a soul to be found. There were a few lights on in the university facilities visible from here, indicating that there were still students there, but here, the buildings of the high school had fallen into complete darkness.

I headed straight the water tower and put my foot on the iron ladder as I began to climb. There was a low fence around the tower, which made it a small blind spot. I felt that if I sat down, no one would see me. Feeling at ease, I sat down. Then, with my bangs blowing in the night wind, I thought to myself. Starting from the beginning. I would rethink everything I had learned here --from the very, very beginning.

Yoishi had disappeared yesterday at 2pm, during the middle of math class. She was headed towards the infirmary, or so she said, but never arrived there. So that would mean that that was the point at which she disappeared. There's also the fact that her teachers were negligent, but there's been no contact from her at all for a full two days now.

Yoishi had been searching for a depressing spot. And she had probably quickly recognized the existence of the ghost inside Miiko:

‘Ayana Takamura’. The Ayana Takamura that disappeared five years ago, with only her shoes left behind. Along with those creepy words she left behind in the school, she disappeared abruptly from this world.

And today, once again, new shoes have been discovered. I don’t know if those shoes belonged to Yoishi or not. I couldn’t get a proper look at the shoes myself from up close. But I had a strange conviction. It felt like Yoishi had definitely been here. It was partly because the shoes that belonged to Ayana Takamura, who had disappeared five years ago, were also here, but more so than that, when I sit here like this, I strongly feel Yoishi’s presence. Her lonely looking profile, and her long hair blowing in the wind as it bristly touches my cheek. There’s no doubt about it. She must have been here, sitting just like this.

“Say, Yoishi—Just what were you doing up here?”

I ask, looking up at the jet-black sky.

“And… just where did you disappear to?”

Ayana Takamura – The senpai that disappeared five years ago in the same way as Yoishi.

What did Krishna-san say again about what that senpai of hers was trying to do?

If I remember correctly, that senpai of hers had realized that the structure of this school was built to create an artificial Mary, and she had planted Kotodama words in order to try and create something. The book of taboo words in the library must have also been a remnant of that. So, did Yoishi see it? Like Krishna-san said, did she chase after her Senpai taking the same spiritual path she had taken? But, where did that lead to? In all likelihood, to the underground place. Because it was the place Ayana Takamura had mentioned.

But -- I didn’t know anything beyond that.

How would you head to the underground place from the roof?

In the first place, there’s no such thing as a vast underground space in

this school. We went to check the boiler room, but there wasn't even a single sign of there being an underground place, nor anything resembling an entrance. If you think it's not there, it's not, was it? Then if you thought it was there, could you go there? How would you think it was there? How would you believe in its existence?

Lost deep in thought, I started rummaging through my hair in frustration, when—

All of a sudden, I caught a glimpse of something beyond the vast darkness from the rooftop.

A building. A long and narrow…building.

--The clock tower…?

That instant, I shuddered and gulped, recalling the accumulated malice that lay there.

And in between that clock tower and this rooftop, the vast sports ground lay spread out.

"Huh… wait a second…"

--The clock tower forms the phallus, and the gymnasium forms the womb.

According to Krishna-san, that's what Ayana had wrote down. Could it be – that she had intentionally omitted the middle of that process? In other words, the direct connection between the phallus and the womb. And what if the womb was not, in fact, the gymnasium, but a place that was far closer? And if you're talking about a place underground, then could it mean the space beneath the sports ground?

And then – I suddenly remembered.

That's right, we heard it in class A. A girl was asked by Yoishi what place depressed her, and she answered, 'The school grounds', Krishna-san started acting weird since then. No, rather, you could say that she had recalled something when she heard that story. In short, Krishna-san might have figured out that the underground place

Ayana Takamura was pointing to was the school grounds. Or perhaps it was in the school grounds that she heard the story. Maybe she was trying to keep me from getting too deeply involved again, or maybe she was afraid of the words ‘if you become aware of it, it becomes a reality’ – I believe it was probably the latter this time.

Of course, this was all complete conjecture.

However, when I got to that thought - I glimpsed of a flicker inside me.

As I recall, the teacher who held the shoes apparently belonging to Yoishi had said it at the time:

『…But, it’s strange. They were arranged facing inwards.』

I took off my sneakers and lined them there.

“Facing inwards… would be like this, right?”

I tried placing them facing the direction of the stairs coming into the rooftop, not facing the outside of the school building.

“He said it was strange, I guess it would have made sense if they were found facing outwards.”

In other words, that was a scene you would often see at the scene of a suicide. Something you would often see in dramas: Shoes would be lined up facing the sea on a precipitous cliff as a silent display, as if to say: ‘I'm going to disappear into the sea’. But – it’s true, I feel like they are facing outwards every time.

I guess only a suicidal person can really know what it's like to be in a suicidal state of mind, but having them face inwards was like falling backwards -- definitely odd.

I stood up. Being aware of the shoes of that Yoishi lined up facing inward, I stood with both feet facing inwards in the same way. A sudden violent breeze blew upwards, and at the same time, I was seized with a terrible fear. I was so scared that I froze and sat back down again. Flustered, I gripped something with my hands.

“T…that was scary…”

It took much more courage to be there than I thought it would.

I had stood on the edge of high places before, but it was still scary. It was also because the scenery in front made me strongly aware of the height. It was quite overwhelming. It made me keenly recognize the gateway to death, if I fell, I was sure to die. But facing backwards, it creates double the fear. You’ve run out of places to put your feet in, and the fear of not knowing when you will fall adds to it.

--Why was she standing here like this?

Yoishi, who lacked a sense of fear, did she stand here trying to understand fear?

No – that’s not it. Her thought process isn’t that of one who plays around with their life in order to feel fear. If that were the case, she wouldn’t be into the occult, being a speed maniac on a bike or being a skydiver would do. She’s not the type that would try to understand fear by going through life threatening situations. If that’s the case, then why?

I took one gulp, and once more, slowly stood back up again.

My knees were shaking. The wind blew through between my legs. There was nothing behind me. There was only a distance of a few centimeters to the edge. If I were to make a slight misstep, I would slam straight down to the hedges from the fourth floor. Tears were flowing in my eyes. Wow, I was acting like a complete fool. Just what was I doing in a place like, with tears in my eyes? Wasn’t I just being reckless with my life? Wasn’t I just toying with the one life I’d been given? The strong wind made my body sway. My shaky knees began losing their sense of stability.

However—

I closed my eyes tightly.

Only Yoishi’s face appeared in my head.

There was only one reason she was standing here.

Right now, there was death right behind me. It wasn't the roof of the school building, but a deeper darkness spread out. That… was hell. A bottomless, entrance into the realm of the dead. I think she stood here like this in order to feel the realm of the dead.

--I'm scared. I'm hopelessly scared of this situation. I'm scared of myself for having arrived at such a stupid idea. Because it meant -- in other words, that there was still a part of me that was broken. I was so broken that I ended up finding my way to the entrance of the world Yoishi was in.

People are constantly looking for ways to preserve their own lives unconsciously. As long as the brain isn't absolutely certain that you won't die even in the worst case, it will put strict limits on your actions. This function, known as a 'limiter', is sometimes removed at will, but that's an extreme mental realm that only a limited number of people can reach. This is where the value of the best athletes and artists lies.

Then, was I an athlete? An artist? No, I was just a normal person. An ordinary man among the ordinary men out there, a hopeless lump made up of deep-rooted delusions. That's why a voice rings out inside me, telling me to stop. It's telling me that it's not a place someone like me can get to. It's telling me it's a world that can only be grasped by those dark colored eyes that have despaired of this world.

But—

I rebutted that inner voice.

What was it that she was really despairing about?

That's right, Yoishi had told me that she had no interest in animals in general. She had full knowledge of human foolishness, and exhausted by the malice that lay in people, she staggered onwards with a gloomy look on her face.

She can be frustrated at times as well, and there are times when something bothers her so much that she can't sleep. She can make

snide remarks towards me as well. That's because she's a living person. Because she has actual emotions. I don't feel that a person who is despairing would have emotions. Because, that person's heart would have already been crushed. Because their heart would no longer be functional.

When she saw Ayana Takamura inside Miiko, she said:

--I won't show you mercy.

Wasn't that an emotional expression of anger?

But nonetheless, the incident in the library happened. That dark gaze was still with me. And then, she said that the subject of Ayana Takamura's experiment was someone other than Krishna-san.

Let's say that the subject of this experiment, which I don't even want to think about it, is me.

If that's the case, then—

The reason she jumped off from here, was for my sake?

Was that why she had gone to the place where Ayana Takamura was?

"Haha…"

I let out a dry laugh as I arrived at that conclusion.

I began crying, and snot came out of my nose. I might have even pissed my pants. Every hole in my body was slovenly open, and I probably leaned back at that moment.

In short—

I jumped from the roof facing backwards, with both my hands spread out.

My body seemed to float softly, and my balls shriveled in an instant. I

felt a life-threatening emergency, as if an electric current surged from my spinal cord to the top of my brain.

But even so, I believed. The underground place must exist beyond the darkness. And that she would be there. At any rate, there was no reason I couldn't go to the place someone else had gone. Thrown out into the emptiness, my body was naturally caught by gravity, and fell to the ground at a speed of 9.8 meters per second. Two seconds later, 19.6 meters per second. Three seconds later, I fell at an accelerated rate of 29.4 meters per second. I knew it would only take three seconds to fall from the top of the four storied building to the ground, but if it took more than that, victory would be mine. I will have crossed through something. That was the entrance to the border between this world and the next. I would cross through something separating this world and the next. The world Yoishi had crossed over to. I would go there, and bring her back. She was still there, alive —

--I fall, fall, fall.

I keep falling… endlessly.

Am I in a revolving lantern[13]?" For some reason, Saki-chan was there, wearing a red school bag. There was Momo, gazing at me with her orange eyes. My friends from middle school, and the lady in the neighborhood who used to get angry with me when I was a kid. The lost bicycle that I had once cherished, it was there in its original form, before it had been crushed in a car accident and thrown away. Memories from the past that I had stowed away and forgotten overflowed from the depths of my mind. I wanted to cry, knowing that I had not erased them all, and that I still had them.

I'm still falling, I thought to myself while crying. Didn't I already fall far enough to hit the ground, have my skull crack open and my spinal fluids spilled all over the place? Could it be that I was already dead? Repeating the memories in the faint remnants of my consciousness before my last moments? It was too long. I kept falling, falling and falling without end.

I must have already gone past the ground long ago.

Beyond the limits of my consciousness which falls into the darkness, melts into it, and scatters.

Towards the deepest depths of hell.

All of a sudden, I realized my body had stopped floating.

I had fallen on top of something soft.

It was dark all around me. The darkness seemed to cling everywhere. Was I dead? Was this the other world?

But suddenly, a light was lit within the darkness, causing me to squint my eyes in a panic. That rectangular shaped light, was from a cell phone. The light from someone's LCD cell phone cut through the darkness as it flowed into my eyes.

"…Ah."

I realized my head was resting on someone's lap. And as soon as I saw the beautiful, pale, gloomy face behind the light of the cell phone, I felt the strength leave my body. My feelings were a mixture of relief, nostalgia, happiness and irritation in a way.

As I opened my mouth, trying to find the words to say—

Yoishi Mitsurugi spoke, in an exasperated tone of voice:

"Even though I told you not to look for me…"

5.

“H-hey Yoishi! Just wait a second!”

I yelled at the slender figure that continued ahead of me.

“W…where the hell are we?”

“To put it bluntly, we’re in the space that lies underneath the academy.” Yoishi answered, without looking back.

The surroundings were dark, as if they had been painted over and over again several times over. The darkness rapidly continued to swallow the light emanating from the cell phone. The ground beneath my feet was slushy, and sticky at the same time. And yet, I still couldn’t see it properly even after aiming the light from the cell phone at it. Only dim light reflected back, and it wasn’t clear if it was soil or concrete. If darkness had density, then this would be the strongest one I’d ever experienced. The depth of the darkness made it almost impossible to tell if my body was still there or not, so much so that it seemed to drag my consciousness elsewhere. That’s why, I continued to speak in desperation. I continued to speak, to make sure that I was still there.

“Are you alright? I mean, what are you doing in a place like this? How long have you been here? Two days? Ah, you called me, right? You called me from this place?”

“Could you ask me one question at a time?”

“…Ah, sorry.”

I spoke with my hands on Yoishi’s arm, so as to not be left behind.

“So there really—really was an underground space beneath the school?”

Yoishi kept walking in front of me, staying silent for a while before answering briefly:

“If you say it’s there, it’s there; if you say it’s not, it’s not.”

…What the heck did that mean?

“This is without a doubt the space underneath the Koumei institute; The individual that I am, and the individual you are, definitely exist here. And the two of us are conversing here in the darkness as we walk. That is neither a hallucination nor a dream. I’ve been safe here for two days, and then I called you. I told you not to look for me. And yet, you still ended up coming.”

“…Shut up about that. In short, you jumped off that place two days ago, didn’t you?”

“That’s right.”

Anyhow, I was slightly relieved at hearing that. Just knowing where I was, the fact that Yoishi was safe, and that we could meet again like this was enough of a relief to make me want to drop to my knees. But what was going to happen from now on was a different problem altogether. How far had we walked in this deep darkness? And how much further did that darkness continue? Could we still return to the place we originally belonged?

But above that, above all else, there was a much more fundamental question that needed to be answered. Why did falling down from the school building bring me—I mean… us, to the underground place? But—

But I was unbearably terrified of asking that directly. The words wouldn’t leave my mouth; if I asked, I might end up learning something I’d have been better off not knowing.

“This is a sealed off place.” Yoishi suddenly muttered. “It seems to have been originally built as a bomb shelter during the war to accommodate a large number of students. The entrance was said to have been sealed shortly after the war.”

“How do you know all that?”

“It’s what I heard.”

Without touching on who or where she heard it from, she continued speaking.

“It was around sixty years ago. A child apparently went missing here.”

“—Huh?”

“Shortly after the war, outdoor classes were held here, and at night, they would hold a test of courage. Most of the children would go in pairs, but one of them – the one who was always bullied by the rest – was sent in alone. He cried and cried, not wanting to go inside, yet regardless, they forced him inside and shut the door. That child continued to bang on the door and screamed, ‘There’s something in here, help me!’ But everyone was too amused to care, and kept him locked in. At last, when his voice disappeared, they opened the door… to find that the boy was gone. The only thing left behind was one of his shoes.”

“…T-that, can’t be…”

“That’s right, the memorial monument behind the library is for that child.”

Yoishi’s voice oozed through the darkness as it reached my ears.

In the slimy, mushy darkness, my breathing became ragged.

Why did Yoishi know something which everyone should have forgotten by now? No, was it really Yoishi I was talking to right now? Where were we headed? And were we on the right path?

The moment I started doubting things, an endless stream of questions gushed forth from inside me. But none of those questions reached the core of my greatest fear. The thing I wanted to know above all else was a far more basic question.

“Say, Yoishi. Just answer me straight on this one.”

In a world of ear-splitting silence, I finally asked it out loud:

“Are we…still alive?”

The moment those words passed my lips, I felt something heavy collapse inside me.

Yoishi and I… we were already dead.

Everything up until now would make sense with that assumption in mind.

If we weren’t dead, there was no way to explain how I could have reunited with Yoishi, who had jumped backwards from the rooftop two days earlier, in an underground space that may or may not exist. We had been walking in the dark for quite some time now, far beyond the range of the Koumei institute.

Moreover—

This darkness was unfathomable. The darkness that should have been driven away by the light of the cellphone, yet it was so dense that it swallowed the light. Seeing the powerlessness of the light, the words ‘futile resistance’ crossed my mind. As if to suggest that hope was meaningless in the face of despair.

“Yoishi, I don’t mind, so just tell it to me straight. We’re already dead, aren’t we?”

I asked once more, unable to control my trembling voice. Yoishi stopped.

“To be precise, we’re not dead yet.”

“…No, but.”

“It would be closer to say that we’re halfway there. But that holds true for all living creatures in this world, so you can’t differentiate precisely. I know that saying that isn’t enough to convince you, so – to put things in another way. This place is like a revolving lantern.”

“A revolving lantern…? Doesn’t that mean we’re really dead?!”

“No. Like I said, we’re halfway there. The underground we walk in definitely exists. But, it’s not a place the living can reach. This is a place where this world and the world beyond begin to melt into each other. Sensing death close by, the clock in the brain ticks away at full speed and merges with the incorporeal -- with the underground space that should not exist, a buried place that should have disappeared from this world, an illusion that only exists because of someone’s strong desire for it.”

“Someone’s strong desire – you mean her?”

Ayana Takamura, right?

Yoishi nodded instantly in response.

“Say, Yoishi. That’s the thing I wanted to ask the most. I met a pale faced girl in the sports ground who was muttering incomprehensible things. She called herself ‘Takamura’. She was the one in the picture with Krishna-san, and the one who I saw reading a book in the café. In short, was that Ayana Takamura, who died five years ago? Am I starting to see ghosts too?”

“That’s not it.”

“—Huh? I mean, that’s common sense, but what I saw was not a dream. It wasn’t a case of mistaken identity or an auditory hallucination. Then, in the end, just where did Ayana Takamura disappear to five years ago? Is she still alive somewhere?”

Then, Yoishi asked me a question in return.

“Tell me, what do you think it means to live?”

“Huh?”

“The word ‘live’ is often used in the biological sense of living, and in the philosophical sense of living one’s life -- in the former sense, she is dead, and in the latter sense, she is still alive. In short, you, who can’t see the dead, met a girl, and that girl was not Ayana Takamura.”

“W…what do you mean?”

“There’s a girl named Takako Takamura in class D of first year.”

“Takako… Takamura?”

“She’s likely to be the younger sister of Ayana Takamura. Five years, ago, after Ayana Takamura’s disappearance, there was a lot of conflict between the school and the Takamura household. I don’t know the details of what happened after that – but Takako enrolled in the school this year. I can’t think of a good reason why you would want to enroll in a school where your sister disappeared, except if she was trying to investigate the mystery behind her disappearance.”

“No, wait a minute. According to Krishna-san’s story, they were step-sisters, right? In that case, isn’t it strange for her step-sister to resemble Ayana Takamura, who as I recall, resembled her mother?”

Yoishi’s response was cold:

“The exterior can change as much as you want it to, depending on what lies inside.”

“…What?”

“Meaning that she too is already a vessel for Ayana Takamura.”

I shuddered as I heard Yoishi’s mumblings about things I didn’t understand -- and raised my voice in a shout as I asked:

“H-how the hell do you know so much? Where and when did you find out about all of this? I don’t think you’re the type who would know what’s happening on campus, and you’ve been here for two days straight. Just how--?”

“Like I told you, it’s what I heard.”

“…Heard from who?”

“From the one who is dead, Ayana Takamura.”

It’s an answer I had already predicted -- but hearing it spoken out

loud was enough to make my feet violently tremble.

Yoishi then pointed towards the depth of the darkness.

“We’re on our way to meet her now.”

○

“The institute’s original sin was in sealing the underground facility.” Yoishi spoke, walking with firm strides in the darkness.

“Without searching or giving a burial to the young boy who had gone missing nearly sixty years ago, they buried everything in the darkness. They built a memorial afterwards, but it always remained as a negative memory. In the Christian world, it’s known as having a cross to bear, and that is the true nature of the atmosphere that covers over this school since long past.”

…Ah.

Everything ended before it even began. It was the atmosphere of this institute that I’d constantly felt: the strangely insular, closed-off nature. Instead of thoroughly experiencing and enjoying my allotted years in a positive way, the school culture made me feel like I was barely getting by.

“When Ayana Takamura disappeared, there might have been a teacher who recalled the existence of this underground space. Or due to it being an old story, its existence might have been forgotten completely -- but as evidenced by the fact that a settlement was reached with the Takamura family, this school's culture of keeping scandals out of the public eye has been passed down from generation to generation. Even if you put a lid on its existence, it won’t simply disappear.”

I felt I had heard something similar before.

That’s right—if I recall correctly, in Krishna-san’s story, those were Ayana Takamura’s words.

So in short, that means that what Sako had said back then about this school being distorted since its foundation – it wasn't just that the design of the school building was based on the Marian faith, or the poor way of treating the memorial monument, but in something that was connected with the two: the idea of complete escapism, of closing one's eyes to what one does not wish to see.

After knowing the true nature of the insular atmosphere of this institute, I gulped down the bitterness swelling up inside me, and asked:

"I heard there are many suicides in this university, so was that the reason?"

"Yes, it is. A negative atmosphere is connected to the negative thoughts of people after all. Places of frequent suicides are created in such a way. Not to mention the clock tower, which had nothing to do with the school originally, was located nearby - well, you could call it bad luck."

"Then, in the end, what was Ayana Takamura trying to accomplish?"

"Who knows."

"Who knows--? You don't even have an idea?"

"I'm a contrarian, after all."

"Huh?"

"Knowing that her wish is for us to imagine it, I'm not so naïve as to imagine it up for her."

Her words hit me like a splash of cold water, and made me remember.

That's it – That was exactly it. When you realize it, it becomes reality. Was Ayana Takamura trying to make us imagine the underground space? And in that underground space, was she trying to conceive the worst things imaginable from the depths of our mind? And that would end up manifesting through the negative thoughts that had been accumulated through the taboo words posted throughout the

school. The shape of people's fear itself would manifest in its original form.

"That's why you shouldn't think about it."

I nodded vigorously in response to Yoishi.

At any rate, I emptied my head of all thoughts, and focused single-mindedly on following Yoishi.

Relying on the dim light from her cell phone, we continued forward.

In the deep darkness resembling the deep sea – only the sound of Yoishi's steady footsteps echoed.

Both myself and Yoishi, we had left our shoes on the roof, and only had our socks on now. We both walked on the ground, not knowing whether it was wet or dry. The temperature was neither hot nor cold, only a lukewarm air surrounded us. Holding up the light from the cell phone wasn't enough to see even a few meters ahead, I couldn't tell if my surroundings were wide, or if the ceiling was tall. I felt as if I was in a vast underground lake, and it also felt like I was present in an ancient ruin that had been destroyed and buried. Forgotten gods from far off lands were looking down on me, and even dinosaurs that were supposed to be extinct were wandering around—

Right then, I vigorously shook my head.

I can't imagine it. This is the world that Ayana Takamura, a denpa of the highest order, wished for, and whatever we think of with fear in our minds could become a reality.

But—Even though I thought that, I was afraid.

Feeling myself melting away little by little, I was scared to death.

"…H-Hey Yoishi."

It was pathetic, but I was about to ask her if I could hold her hand, when—

"We've arrived."

Yoishi suddenly stopped, and focused the light from her cellphone somewhere.

There, between the collapsed rubble and debris—

Something white and shiny was sitting in the narrow darkness.

For a moment, I couldn't make out what it was, so I turned the light of my cell phone toward it as well.

And the instant I realized what it was – I leaped towards Yoishi.

It was the corpse of high school girl.

It was a corpse, but it retained a beauty beyond the concept of all the corpses I had seen in books and at funerals. Her eyes were closed and her soft lips were slightly open. Her cheeks were translucent white, and her shoulder-length hair was wavy, as if it had been groomed. But all of it shone slimily, reflecting the light as if it were wet. And naturally, there was no sign of life from her at all.

“No way, Is this…?”

“Yes, this is Ayana Takamura.”

It was—

It was… a perfect sculpture.

I had seen it before on an occult website. Adipocere, an organic substance that is formed when a corpse is preserved in almost the same condition it was in when it was alive, by changing the fat in the body from liquid to solid under low temperature with a certain level of humidity. The characteristic feature of the body is that the skin and hair shone like a wax doll. I had only seen photos of the famous Italian girl Rosalia[14], but this was much more than that. She had a divine presence, as if she would open her eyes and start talking at any moment.

“Did this girl -- I mean, did she jump off from the school building five years ago like us -- and came here alive? And she died here, because she couldn’t find a way out?”

“Probably.” Yoishi answered quietly. “This person probably saw too much. She may have been able see ghosts, She may have even seen the patterns of erosion in the human spirit that taboo words achieved. That’s why, she tried to control all of it. She tried to control it all, and to accomplish something with it. What that was - no one knows anymore, and it's best not to think about it. The fact that in this school, which was founded in an attempt to create the Virgin Mary, had various distortions in its origins, yet the fact that she still conceived – perhaps you could call it a miracle.”

“…What the hell do you mean?”

“You could say that she was probably the first woman in history who successfully conceived a virgin birth.”

“Huh…but, this person was…”

I was about to mention what happened between her and her father – when Yoishi shook her head.

“Say, have you heard of Pseudocyesis?”

“What is that?”

“In the broadest sense of the word, it’s also what’s known as a nocebo effect. Remember when you chanted ‘Agyousangyou’ and believed you had lost your guardian spirit? It’s the opposite of that. In other words, she was not pregnant.”

“H-how do you know such a thing?”

“Because—”

Yoishi answered.

“The strange rain that recently occurred at Musashino were menstruations caused by this place.”

...Eh?

“M…menstruation, that means…”

“Yes, menstruation - or a woman's period - is when the lining of the uterus is expelled with the blood, which happens when fertilization does not occur. It doesn't happen to pregnant women. Whether she had relations with her father or not, I don’t know the truth. But I suspect that because she was not fertilized, countless pieces peeled away from this place defined as the womb. It was perhaps small animals and their pieces that this womb gathered to protect its vital composition, in opposition to her thoughts.”

“…J-just wait a second. Didn’t you just say that Ayana Takamura was the first woman in history to successfully conceive a virgin birth?”

“Conception did occur. But it was not done through regular insemination. By believing she was pregnant, and by denying the father with her soul, she ended up created this nightmarish corridor. And the child she believed in her womb was--”

That instant—

I sensed an even darker presence lurking in the depths of the darkness.

A blackness darker than black.

A darkness deeper than dark.

It had a width that surpassed the ceiling, whose location I didn't even know; it covered an overwhelming width, one I couldn’t even imagine. As I recognized it, all measures of instrument in my head started going crazy.

“…W-what the hell…is that?”

Something enormous was wriggling and squirming, slowly moving in the darkness.

While staring at it, Yoishi – suddenly collapsed.

With a pained groan, vomit and excreta spilled from her mouth.

In front of a malice only she could see -- she was now vomiting painfully.

“---This is wrong.”

Yoishi grimaced, her eyes shining in pain.

“This kind of conception… is wrong.”

With those words—

I realized. Up until now, was there any malice in Ayana Takamura’s actions? Were they not the result of pure, innocent, untainted actions devoid of any corruption? That is why Yoishi did not vomit in the clock tower, nor in the Miiko incident, nor in the library. Because she didn’t feel any malice there. Because coarse feelings like malice were not mixed in.

“She just didn't like the impurity.” Yoishi spoke. “She disappeared before she could corrupt the world around her -- and yet, she was reborn here in combination with the countless negative thoughts and malice that she herself collected. What inseminated her was the innumerable malice and the unrestrained egos of people that she herself collected.”

Hearing that, I now knew that that the lump of darkness I saw above me was alive.

But it was still something in a form I didn’t understand. It was something that was repeating self-denial in a tormented manner, trying to figure out how to break itself down and form itself anew.

And just when I thought that, something rises up inside me as well.

That’s right. The black mass writhing in the depths of the darkness was—

It was just like me. The figure without a shape was me: unsure about what kind of person to be when it went out into the world, and who was completely at a loss for what it should become. The me that raged like a rising cumulonimbus cloud, with the ego I couldn’t throw away, and the dogma I carried, which had been concentrated and fermented to the point of decay, and which continued to churn out obnoxious theories. Self-denial. The ultimate self-hate. The irrepressible loathing that comes when facing your mirror-image up close. A doppelganger in the occult -- what a perfect example. The

feeling of fear and repulsion from one's shadow. it came to me suddenly, and with the feeling of my stomach churning, I threw up there as well.

"…What the hell is that? What did Ayana Takamura give birth to in this place?"

'Give birth to'. I had ended up using those words unconsciously, but —

Somehow, I was so sure of it that I couldn't take the words back. Takamura Ayana had given birth to something here. This was the womb, and this lukewarm darkness was amniotic fluid. And that thing here right now was a baby, struggling to get out of here, trying to become something.

"A new Ayana Takamura."

Yoishi spoke in a whisper.

"She incarnated herself here."

"Incarnated—?"

The meaning of incarnation. A child of God is born as a human. If that was the case, does that mean Ayana Takamura became a God? No way. There's no way that could be true. God was nothing but a man-made thing, and it existed only in the hearts of those who believe in it, and...and—

"And it's a little more sane!"

I screamed out loud while still in pain from the gastric juices that kept rising up inside me...when suddenly—

--Say, isn't it so fun to see people in distress?

A clear, bright voice resounds from amidst the darkness.

With a start, I swing around to see Ayana Takamura's corpse. I focus the light of my cell phone to the body, wondering if she had come back to life. But a corpse is a corpse. It did not move. It only glowed in silence.

--The belief that humans are fundamentally good, and the belief that they are fundamentally evil. I believe in neither of those. Humans intrinsically hold neither of those traits. They are simply weak.

Hearing those words makes my stomach churn once again. I feel a violent, nauseating surge of gastric juices rising up inside me.

"W…Who's there?"

I intended to strain out my voice, but what came out was a faint whimper.

--They are simply weak and act according to their own convenience each and every time. They get hungry, so they eat what lies in front of them. Be it plants or animals: they eat. There is no morality in that. Things like morality are merely drivel spewed by the gluttonous individuals with too much free time on their hands, it's a concept that is nothing more than air to those who hover between life and death. That's all there is to it, so don't you think it's ridiculous to talk about things like God or the Devil while being blind to those shortcomings. Why do people feel elation when someone else is being bullied? Oh, and please don't be boring and claim you're any different. We don't need that kind of boring pretentiousness since we're the only ones here. You're the first one to think 'Ah, I'm so glad I'm not the one being bullied. I'm so glad I'm not the one being humiliated.' And just like that, after you recognize that you're in a safe place, you feel a sense of joy from deep inside. You're from the 'pressure-free' generation, after all. [15] *You just want to find an even weaker target in a society that's already weakened as a whole. And it's not wrong. It's*

the delight that comes with avoiding ridicule. It's that feeling that has kept humans alive all along. Humans have only survived this long by valuing their lives. In short, human misery is enjoyable. Immensely enjoyable, isn't it?

I couldn’t move at all.

Unable to argue back, I was simply overwhelmed by that voice. My entire body was drenched by those black words.

--When you finally recognize that, I believe that’s when humans can go to the next level.

Dammit, this wasn’t good. Listening to this voice was not good at all. I don’t know about her being pure or not – but she was a taboo word user whose words were enough to incite the heart of the listener.

The next thing I knew – I was screaming.

I screamed recklessly, summoned my full strength, and grabbed Yoishi’s hand, who was right beside me.

“Yoishi, let’s go!”

I turned around and started running blindly back towards the path we came from. I had no idea where to run or how to escape from that voice and that mass in the darkness, but I kept running regardless, with Yoishi’s hand in mine.

However—

“Tell me, don’t you think the human who created God is the greatest genius in history?”

The voice chases me.

In total darkness, with no way to see in front, behind, above or below me, a cheerful voice closed in behind me. I felt a giggle so close to me as if it were right next to my ear – my heart started throbbing violently at the same time, and I felt a sickening premonition bubbling up from deep inside me.

“To take something as vague as God, to make people believe in its existence, and then siphon off their wealth, Isn't it the most successful business model in the history of mankind?”

Tears welled up in my eyes at hearing the voice right next to me.

“…H-hey?”

But the moment I started to look back—

“Don’t turn around.” I heard a cold voice.

“…Yoishi? It’s you, isn’t it?”

I scream as I grip her hand and continue running.

“It’s me. I’m right behind you. So don’t turn back. Just keep running.”

“O-okay.”

I didn’t know what was going on, but those words spurred me on as I kept running.

But the darkness grew even stronger. It was lukewarm, clinging to my entire body, it was as if I was engulfed in water and my body wasn’t moving as I commanded. But I still kicked the ground with as much strength as I could muster. I gripped Yoishi’s hand tightly and ran desperately in order to escape.

But—

“It’s useless.”

The voice was still right behind me.

“It all stems from the ego – you have to accept that. Humans are the embodiment of malice. Pushed into a corner, a parent will consume even their young. It's a mistake to blame them for that.”

It was as if it was transmitting from my arm connected with Yoishi, reverberating in my bones, in my flesh.

“It’s useless to regulate it with morals or religion. Malice lurks in the depths of the heart. There it simmers, only to burst out one day unexpectedly. It will become thicker, darker and burst forth into this world.”

“H-hey, Yoishi?”

“…”

I shouted out once more behind me.

The voice, which seemed to have echoed directly in my head up until now, was now clearly pouring into me as a real, physical voice that made the air tremble. It reached my ears as if the voice had truly gained a form, and it echoed in my surroundings – and that thought which had already taken root inside me, was difficult to shake off.

Was the person behind me right now, really Yoishi?

The cold hand I was clutching in desperation right now, did it really belong to Yoishi?

“Hey, did you notice?”

Those…were the last words Ayana Takamura left behind in the notebook. ‘Dictation -- or the research of texts or sequences of text whose meaning, when understood, can cause spiritual phenomena’. Don’t become aware of it, is what Krishna-san had said. Don’t become aware of the thing Ayana Takamura hopes for. If you become aware of it, it ends up becoming reality.

This was a trap.

The last and most important trap set up by Ayana Takamura.

But—if that was the case, then what should I do? What should I do from now on? Just looking back and seeing Yoishi's face once should be enough to shake off this fear. However, if I look back and don't see Yoishi there…. If I see Ayana Takamura's waxed corpse laughing at me instead… then I surely wouldn't be able to stand anymore.

Isn't this—

Isn't this just like some sort of legend?

That's right, the story of Izanagi's escape from the realm of the dead while being pursued by Izanami – or wait, was it the story of Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction? Wasn't there was also a similar story in Greek mythology? Which mythology was it from and in what form? Shit, I can't remember. In any case, the common aspect in all of them was that you must never look back. Everyone who looks back ends up dead. That's a death flag.

"Haven't you learned? When you combine all the colors, you always get black."

Kekekekekekekeke, A voice that sounded like a creepy, monstrous bird roared in the darkness.

Even though I didn't look back, I could feel someone behind me laughing so hard their red lips were split open.

But—But my knees were at their limits. It was impossible to keep running in this disturbed psychological state any longer. I had my feet planted firmly on the ground, but it felt like I could fall down at any moment. Without conviction in your actions, you can't exert your true power. That's what motivation is all about. Even for something like running away, motivation is necessary. In other words, no one can run away unless they are sure that they can escape. And besides that, if the hand I was holding right now didn't belong to Yoishi, then all my actions would be meaningless. Having jumped off that rooftop with tears in my eyes would be completely meaningless.

Was I really holding Yoishi's hand?

Was I on the right path in order take Yoishi back to the real world?

If not, then I had to go back. And this time, I would have to take the real Yoishi with me and run away again. And for that, I had to look back once… Look back firmly, and confirm who was behind me—

As I arrived at that thought, I started slowly tilting my head around, when—

“Let go of my hand.” I heard that voice. “That is the most rational and correct course of action.”

“…Yoishi?”

“As long as I’m with you, you’ll probably never get out of here.”

“S-stop messing around.” I yelled at her as I ran, and my tilted neck turned back to lock itself face-forward once again.

“Listen to me. I can’t deny that darkness isn’t comfortable for me.”

“Hey Yoishi! Stop bullshitting. Just run. No, it’s fine even if you walk. Just don’t stop!”

But there wasn’t any strength left in Yoishi’s arm. I couldn’t feel the strength in her grip anymore.

“You and I stand in different places. The scenery we view is different.”

Hearing that—

Unawares, I realized I had stopped in my tracks.

With our hands tied together as if they were bound, we stood there in the darkness of the endless world.

There was no color here. No sound. Not even hope. Yet there was a plethora of malice. It was so full of malice that there was no place to stand unless you surrendered yourself to it.

And this darkness was—

The world that Yoishi Mitsurugi had always been looking at.

I was trying to pull Yoishi up to the world I saw. To a brighter world. A world everyone could smile. Krishna-san always told me that it was impossible. And yet, I still somehow felt I could do it. But, in order to pull her up, I would have to go to the place she stood at. I had to be strong enough to stand in this darkness and bear the weight for both of us without being consumed by it. That—was something my entirety could not bear. And if I couldn't do that, then I shouldn't have gotten involved to begin with. It would have been better for me to have feigned ignorance along with the rest of my schoolmates and lived happily within the limits of what I could take responsibility for. That would have been the smart thing to do. Isn't that how everyone should live? Becoming an adult is all about that, right? It's about making compromises. It's about making distinctions between what you can and can't do. That was something a kid like me could never do. That's why I felt so cut off in university. I couldn't be one of them.

"I'm—"

A tear rolled down my cheek before I'd realized.

"I'm… such a brat..."

This was a step towards adulthood. And a hard fact of this world that you had to give up in order to move forward. I was cut off because I'd been stubbornly running away from that fact up until now. Because I'd been acting so childishly, I ended up getting involved in all sorts of paranormal events.

The path everyone takes. Giving up. Giving up on what you can't do, that's what it meant to be an adult. I was enveloped in a myriad of regrets, the strength draining from my body. 'Get yourself together,' shouts a voice inside me, but it was quickly fading away. My fingers, which had been barely holding on to Yoishi's fingers, were finally about to break away, when –

“That’s why – I couldn’t figure it out.”

Those faint, quivering words reached my ears.

“No matter how many days I thought, no matter how much sleep I missed, I couldn’t come up with an answer.”

“…To what?” I ask in a hoarse tone of voice, and—

“What in the world did I need to do, to be your friend?”

The moment the meaning of those words reached the bottom of my heart—

Countless fragments came rushing together all at once. I heard the scattered parts of something become whole again, with a clink. I realized I’d gotten something spectacularly wrong since the beginning.

No way, She—

No way, for so long, she’d been—

“It’s been twenty days, seven hours and forty-two minutes.”

I recalled the words Yoishi first said to me after I’d returned to

Tokyo.

Twenty days, seven hours and forty-two minutes, you mean to tell me she had been thinking about it as the seconds ticked by? In front of the clock tower – when she was leaving school in the cat incident. And so incessantly that she stayed locked up in the library. She had been brooding on it with bloodshot eyes, earnestly and devotedly.

That—

In short, on that day at Tokyo station, those brief words she ended up saying to me—

Those brief words: I'll become your friend.

She had been agonizing over how to make that small, trifling promise into a reality. She wasn't agonizing over the fact that she could see ghosts, nor the fact that there was no salvation for those involved with ghosts – all her attention was simply devoted in searching for an answer to the existence known as 'friend'.

But—Is such a foolish thing like that really possible?

No…no, if it's Yoishi we're talking about, then it's possible. The world that Yoishi saw constantly must have been her answer. It was… this darkness. Without a doubt, she must have been unsure of herself. The pain of having a friend. That hopeless path. Friendship is an emotion that develops between equals. It's a relationship of sharing the big and small things. That's why she was so obsessed over a world as trivial as 'friend'. It was because she knew the pain of being alone, and the comfort of it. That's why, she didn't know if it was right to forcibly make the cold darkness she saw as her friend.

As I recall, in the cat incident, Yoishi pointed at me and said: 'This person is a friend candidate of mine'. I wondered what the hell that meant at the time, but now, I finally understand. At the end of her hellish struggle, making me a 'friend candidate' was her point of compromise. She couldn't have come up with that term without going through so many absurd and complicated ghost stories. At the edge of my rope, I finally realized something I shouldn't have, and having realized it, I knew it was something I had to do, it was finally

clear to me.

--She’s an idiot. She’s been such a big idiot.

“Hey, you goddamn idiot!”

I yelled – and with a sudden jerk, turned to look back.

I didn’t care if turning back in this case was a death flag or whatever. I didn’t care if the Grim Reaper was laughing right behind me. So what if the numerous gods had met with tragedy in all those legends. In the end, I was an idiot, just like her. Only a fool like me could confront the fool who had been so sincere in confronting something as trivial as becoming friends. I don't know what I don't know, and I am afraid of what I am afraid of. I want to see what I want to see, and I can't let go of what I can't let go of. However, if I lied to myself about that, then I’d stop being myself anymore, and I couldn't walk with my head held high. That was the thing that scared me above all else. That, Yoishi, is the scariest thing in this world.

I intended to say that as I turned around –

And aimed the light from my cell phone towards Yoishi.

The only thing that appeared there was Yoishi Mitsurugi's pale face. Without being enraptured by the darkness in the back – my vision was fixed on Yoishi's pitch dark eyes.

"A friend isn't such a profound thing!"

I spoke, facing the girl I couldn't feel any emotions from.

"Just having someone be there when you need them is enough."

However, despite that, she would respond in that way, right?

She would wear her depressed looking face, with a posture that suggested she was carrying something heavy, and she would say that, right?

That she stands in the bottomless darkness.

Then, I'll say it as well. I'll say it again and again.

–So what?

You’re crying there, aren't you? Aren't you in pain, crying there all by yourself? Even though you lost the feeling of fear, but didn’t it just stop reaching your brain? The truth is, you're scared, aren't you? You're so scared that you're shaking.

"In times like that, someone who stands by your side is what you call a ‘friend’."

The moment Yoishi’s eyes widened slightly at these words, I suddenly felt a strange sensation take hold over my body.

It was a wind.

A strong wind was blowing in from somewhere.

Taken aback, my eyes darted around here and there.

"A way out? Where is it blowing in from?"

With my face still messed up with tears, I gripped Yoishi's hand once more.

--Wait.

Suddenly, I thought I heard a sound in the wind

--Hey, wait for me.

The voice blended in with the wind as it continued to echo.

It wasn’t the clear voice filled with confidence and arrogance from before. That voice was a quivering, frail and weak voice like a child pleading to its parent.

--Don’t leave me alone. I’ve been here alone for more than five years. No one came here. The darkness I yearned for, the darkness I loved, the darkness I was entranced by – it’s far darker here than I wished for. It’s so black that it could swallow me whole. It wasn't supposed to be like this. If you leave, I’ll be left alone all over again–

“Don't overlap your consciousness.”

Yoishi whispered.

“Right now, she embodies antisocial personality disorder in the truest sense of the word.”

Those words brought me back to my senses, as Yoishi continued:

“Having excessive self-esteem, and being self-centered. No remorse, no feelings of guilt, apathetic, and no empathy. They are talkative and friendly at first glance, but they cannot take responsibility for their actions – in that definition for antisocial personality disorder, there’s actually one more trait.”

“One more, you say?”

Nodding in affirmation, Yoishi added in a somewhat pained tone:

“They lie to an abnormal extent. Of course, that is just a scholar's label for an entity he doesn't understand. However, that label has taken a life of its own and become a Kotodama that has shaped Ayana Takamura's current existence. That is why we should question everything she says—”

“Then there’s no problem, is there?”

Yoishi, who was busy weaving a web of words, became bewildered at my sudden outburst.

“I mean, you said it before, didn’t you? That every single aspect of that definition applies to you.”

I spoke to the darkness - to the wind that was bursting in.

And I spoke to the dark eyed girl who stood close to me:

“if that’s the case, then I guarantee it. You, who are so bad at reading the room and so good at uncovering hidden truths, are so incapable of lying that it makes me want to tell you to at least lie a little - in other words, you're different from her.”

“Are you a genuine idiot? That’s not what I’m talking about at all--”

“That’s right, I’m an idiot. A goddamned idiot! But both you and me, and everyone else in this world is an idiot! Humans have always been foolish to a helpless degree, but we’ve managed to get this far because we accepted it and struggled with it, haven't we? Listen carefully: Me and you are both just idiots, and we’re not broken in any way. That’s why – That’s why…there’s no need for you to stay here in this dark place!”

That moment, the wind changed its direction.

And that sad voice reached my ears as if scattered by the wind.

--Was I… mistaken?

--Did I fail to become a Mary in this school?

Why was it?

I didn’t know why – but I was getting irritated.

An intense anger was welling up from the bottom of my stomach.

Not everyone who comes to this closed off space called school finds their purpose in life. The timing for finding it is different for each person. That is why, people lose their way. They are unsure about their actions and become lost. I can say it now: A university is a place to be lost at. I’m sure that me, Yoishi, the other students, and even Krishna-san are always lost. And probably will be for the rest of our lives, until we die. Being an adult isn’t about compromising. There

are undoubtedly adults out there who don't compromise. That's why there's no such thing as a boundary line between adults and children. Everyone has to struggle to the bitter end for the rest of their lives. They have to properly face up to each wall that comes their way.

That's why, I said it.

In the wind, I yelled so loud I thought my throat would burst.

That wasn't directed at Ayana Takamura.

It was directed at something that Ayana Takamura was trying to destroy – or rather, it was someone in this world who was trying to squeeze us into a mold. It was the society that called us carefree, the adults who fantasized about artificially creating a Mary, the intellectuals who labeled incomprehensible thoughts a personality disorder. I screamed at something solid, something firm that formed the world, something that I couldn't move, no matter how much I struggled.

"Hey, listen to me, you goddamn idiot. I don't know anything about religion. And I don't have any sense of duty to some guy who died more than 2000 years ago. But I do have one thing to say in defense of that bearded carpenter. Being a messiah is definitely not an inherent trait, get it? And it's not something that's created by ganging up together. It's definitely an acquired achievement! To be born in a hopeless world, to experience countless despair, and yet, to still be an idiot and somehow try to save everything while facing that infinite wall – isn't that why he's still called the messiah, even after 2000 years?!"

In an instant--

With a bang, the world cracked open.

Something began falling down. Something was falling down in a fierce downpour.

"…Ow."

I picked up the thing that hit my head, and found it to be a small fish. There were frogs, nails, and even a turtle. There were countless

other small animals, water, and hair frozen in ice.

“S…strange rain?”

“The darkness… is collapsing.”

Yoishi replied to me as I crouched trying to protect my head.

The falling objects soon turned into a rain of organic matter so furious that it was impossible to look up. It was melting in a way that was nothing compared to the collapse of the dream mansion that had once existed inside of me. And then I heard a twisting cry from somewhere -- this wind pressure. My balls, or rather my groin, felt like they were shrinking. I remember this one - but no, wait a minute. This is the sensation of a body plummeting somewhere. Oh crap. The ground beneath my feet was empty. There was no ground to stand on. Right now, without a doubt, I was falling down somewhere.

And at the same time, I felt the darkness slowly fading.

The cold air that seemed to reject life was changing into something warm and full of life, and various smells suddenly wafted through the air. A fierce gust of wind blew through my hair. My clothes were flapping about, and I finally remembered that I was wearing a blazer from Koumei Institute High School.

--Hey, this place is…it can’t be.

Now I was surrounded by countless neon lights shining in the darkness of the night. Lights where people live. Peaceful lights of people relaxing at home. I knew it -- that was it. Was it the place where I jumped off the school building? Was it a replay from that time? I mean, even though it was my fault for diving, wasn't this a bad ending no matter how you slice it?

That moment, I felt a slight warmth from the tip of my hand. I was gripping something. I look toward the tip of my hand – to see Yoishi Mitsurugi, whose hair was also blowing in the night sky.

“Are you alright?”

“For now.”

“Well, that’s to be expected.”

I share a nonsensical conversation with Yoishi as we both fall down.

“I mean, this is a helpless situation, right? We’re going to end up smashing the ground if we just keep going on like this.”

“Usually, a revolving lantern is the thing you see just before you die, so I guess so.”

I finally started panicking after hearing Yoishi’s calm retort.

“Oooh, Oi, stop messing around! I don’t wanna die! Do something!”

“That’s why I told you not to look for me.”

“This is not the time to complain about that! What are we supposed to do?”

“In Ayana Takamura’s case, her body disappeared because she was swallowed by the other side at this point of time. She became a rare case whose body and spirit transferred to the other side in its entirety.”

“And in our case?”

“Unless something convenient happens, we're both going to die.”

…Hey, you’re fucking kidding me.

I still have lingering attachments to this world. I haven’t even married yet, I wanted to ride a big motorcycle, and I was thinking of driving a classic American car someday. I wanted to visit the Inca ruins, I had a mountain of video games I wanted to play, movies I wanted to watch, manga I wanted to read, so many songs I wanted to listen to. All of these were my little dreams that were supposed to come true once I was out in the world and earning money. I'm a mass made up of unfulfilled, deep-seated delusions!

Teary eyed, I had intended to shout that out loud, but—

In reality, all I could do gape my mouth open.

However, in the blowing wind - Yoishi's calm words reached my ears.

"I'm glad."

"What the hell?"

"This way of dying -- it's too good for me."

"—Glad? Are you fucking kidding me? I'm not glad at all!"

Wouldn't this be a suicide? No wait, my body will be discovered together with Yoishi who disappeared two days ago. This will be a mystery that will endure to the end of time, right? The title 'Mystery of the additional corpse: The bizarre Koumei Institute double suicide' or something along those lines will surely delight occult fans all over the world. Ahh Dammit, how trivial: a lover of mystery stories becomes a mystery story himself in the end. This is what they mean by the phrase 'The mummy hunter himself becomes a mummy'. Krishna-san, I'm sorry. Thank you for taking care of me. I really was an idiot for getting involved with Yoishi. But a hopeless guy like me would probably repeat the same thing again even if I were to be reborn. I can't be the one to say that for Yoishi: I was the bigger idiot all along.

At that moment—

A crashing thud ran through my back.

My breathing stopped, and my spine crackled so much it felt like my body was falling apart.

I couldn't catch my breath fast enough and I started coughing violently

"*C…cough*"

But—wait?

I'm alive. I'm…alive?

Or, I'm dead and that's why the pain isn't so bad?

I was dumbfounded and thinking such thoughts, when—

“Are you an idiot?”

A nostalgic abuse fell down upon me.

My blurred vision slowly came into focus with the speaker of those words.

It was Krishna-san, dressed in the Koumei high school uniform. She looked down on me with tears welled up in her two large eyes lined up on her baby face.

“…K-Krishna-san?”

“Welcome back.”

Next to her wearing a smile of relief, was the handsome looking high school student, Yukihito Kurimoto-kun.

“…Eh? How, what happened…?”

I finally twisted my head and looked around—

Me and Yoishi were hand-in-hand, laying side-by-side on a giant gym mat.

“Thank goodness we made it in time.”

When I looked closely, I saw that Krishna-san was out of breath. It seemed that both Krishna-san and Kurimoto-kun had dragged this giant mat all the way over from the gym room.

“How…did you know we were going to fall right here?”

The tone of my voice had begun to tremble, Krishna-san smiled weakly in response.

“Hah, you have no idea – we barely made it! But it’s all thanks to you. I realized it at the last minute, all thanks to your hard work.”

“Uh…I have no idea what you mean.”

“It’s all thanks to the Fafrotskies phenomenon translation we both did together.”

“…Huh?”

“Only one type of thing rains down.”

…Ahh.

Is that so?

So that’s how it was.

That voluminous research material that got sent over from England. The strange and mysterious Fafrotskies phenomenon: On certain days, things such as frogs, fish, blood and stones would suddenly rain down from the sky, in Japan it was called ‘Strange rain’ since times immemorial.

After she went to the university, Krishna-san had gotten worried and came back to the high school together with Kurimoto-kun. There, she caught glimpse of me facing backwards as I staggered on top of the roof; She apparently called out to me in a panic but I didn’t respond to her voice – and that’s where the idea stuck her like a bolt out of the blue.

“Yoishi was there two days ago. The possibility was also high as she had left her hallway shoes there. And right now, you were standing there, Nagi-kun. You were standing on the edge of the water tower, facing backwards in the same way Yoishi had probably done just before she disappeared. That’s when I suddenly remembered. A single sentence that was written in the countless cases that we had worked so hard to translate. The commonality of what rains down is that it is of a single type. And then it came to me: What if the Fafrotskies phenomenon is a space-time shift that occurs in the psychological state between life and death, where a gap in space-time perception affects reality. That’s why I thought you had arrived at that hypothesis and were acting in that way. And I knew that in the next moment, you were going to jump down. But my intuition told me that what would fall down would be of a single type – You and Yoishi

together.”

…Uhh, no. I wasn’t thinking about the Fafrotskies phenomenon at all at that time.

“That’s why I’m saying it’s all thanks to the work you did. The fact that you stayed up so many nights working on it even while you were busy with your part-time job left a strong impression on me. That's why I was so convinced. And this is the fruit of that.”

I grabbed the arm that was extended out to me and stood up, finally turning around to look in Yoishi’s direction.

Yoishi was lying down on top of the mat with her arms and legs stretched outwards. Her short skirt was turned up to an almost obscene extent, but she made no attempt to fix it. She was looking straight up at the sky, as if she were perplexed at having returned alive to this world.

“It’s forbidden...to look.”

“…Huh?”

--Look? At what?

But getting lured in, I also looked up.

A conspicuously bright star stood out in the night sky. Umm, if I remember correctly, it was Vega.

“Ah… you mean the constellation Lyra?”

Krishna-san, seemingly sapped of her strength, sat down and also looked up at the sky.

“She’s referring to the ancient legend of Izanagi and Izanami, in which it was forbidden to look back; Turning to look back or looking at forbidden things despite warning brought misfortune and sorrow. In psychology, it’s known as the Caligula effect.”

I listened to her words in a daze as Kurimoto-kun also sat down

clasping his knees. By chance, we were all looking up at the night sky as if we were drawing a four-sided shape with Vega at the center.

“Similar stories are found all over the world. And there’s also one about that constellation. The constellation Lyra, which is named after the lyre given to Orpheus, the son of the sun god Apollo, who, after having lost his beloved wife, goes to Hades, the god of death, and asks him to bring her back to life.”

Ahh, I finally remember.

It was Orpheus. The guy I was trying to remember back then.

As if all the accumulated grime had been peeled off from the sky – in a rare event, a multitude of stars shone in the Tokyo night sky.

Under the starry sky, Krishna-san continued her story:

“The lyre Orpheus played in memory of his dear wife deeply moved Hades, who decided to break the rules and return his wife to him. But he warned Orpheus not to turn back until he had left the realm of the dead, and yet, Oprheus did end up looking back. He was worried whether or not his wife was really with him. And thus, his wife was returned to the realm of the dead once more, and Orpheus, drowned in sorrow, also died. It is said that Apollo, saddened by his demise, placed his lyre in the night sky.”

“The prohibition of ‘not looking’, is a portent of misfortune that is sure to come.”

Krishna-san nodded in response to Yoishi’s words.

“I see. So it's compassion from the gods that makes the shock of the inevitable unhappy ending a little easier to accept.”

I didn’t quite understand –in short, what was Yoishi trying to say would happen to me, having looked back when I wasn’t supposed to? I tilted my head in confusion, Yoishi let out a sigh and slowly got up. She gave me a glance and muttered:

“Even though I told you not to look for me...”

Sounding somewhat embarrassed this time.

Epilogue - Coda to Rororo

“You and I have similar names: Nagito, Yukihito.”

It was lunch break, a few days had passed since then.

Visiting the Koumei university’s Beatnik research society, Yukihito Kurimoto-kun muttered that out loud.

“I thought that maybe that was part of the reason why she was worried about you, Nagito-san. She might not see you as a stranger.”

“No, if I had to put a finger on it, It’s because I’m way more careless than you are.”

I paused from organizing the occult related materials scattered on my desk, and said that. Kurimoto-kun gently smiled in response.

“That seems to be the case.”

He rudely agreed without even denying it.

“But I've been through a lot myself. Nee-san worries about me all the time.”

“A lot, you say?”

“I committed suicide once.”

“—Huh?”

“It was back when I was in my second year of middle school. I was being bullied a lot in class. My textbooks were thrown away, I was stripped naked in front of the girls, made to lick the spit on the floor, got beat up in the toilet, bullied in every way imaginable. I should have talked to my family about it, but I couldn’t even do that. That’s why I tormented myself over it, and went to the roof of an apartment

building near the station. I thought I would be at ease if I jumped off from there – so I committed suicide."

"…No, But, you're here safe and sound because you stopped, right?"

To say that you committed suicide in a perfect tense, isn't that strange?

I asked him that in reply, when Yukihito-kun smiled again. This time, his smile was white and clear, startling me a little.

"No, I jumped; without a doubt, my life should have ended back then."

"Wa—Wait a minute. Then why are you here alive right now?"

"Who knows."

"Who knows…?"

"When I came to, I found myself standing behind the rooftop railing. Even though, I'm sure I had crossed it and fallen from the other side. I had felt no fear, only relief, thinking I would finally be at ease. I remember feeling light as if my heart had grown wings, but when I came to, I was standing behind the railing with only my heart feeling a little lighter."

"…"

"When I turned to look back, I saw Nee-san standing there. She was silently staring at me and crying. And after she cried and cried, she told me. She told me she was sorry she didn't notice."

Yukihito-kun looked down with a somewhat distant gaze.

"I still don't really understand what happened back then – it seemed Nee-san caught sight of me wandering around at the station. However, I didn't reply to her even when she called out to me. Moreover, she noticed someone walking behind me, another me. According to the genre you guys are into, it might have been what you call a doppelganger – but anyway, it seems she saw two of me. Nee-san followed me to the top of the apartment building. There, she

saw the two of us standing on the edge of the roof – where one soon climbed over the railing and jumped."

Yukihito-kun looked up to face me once more,

"Nee-san told me she didn't know which one of us was the real one. If the both of us tried to jump at the same time, she would have stopped us, but one of us stayed behind the railing, while the other one crossed it. And we smiled at each other, as if acknowledging the roles we each had to play. That's why she said she didn't move."

That – was a strange story.

It wasn't the same as an out-of-body experience. I'd never heard of stories where you trust your doppelganger. Most of those stories usually involve rejection that leads to identity collapse, where one day you're astonished at seeing another self that's exactly like you.

"I talked to Nee-san about it afterwards – and she explained it to me. She said that in that moment, didn't I scrape off the part of me that I so desperately wanted to cut off? That my soul must have shredded by the conflict between the two: The tormented self that wanted to kill my bullies, and the self that thought I would have been better off disappearing. Like I was killing myself with a part of myself, Nee-san cried and apologized for not noticing the pain I was in. But, I…"

"Hmm?"

"I've been thinking about it recently. I somehow felt that someone was standing by my side at that time."

"…"

"Someone who was worried about me, who stayed close by without saying a word. I think that's why only the negativity disappeared."

Saying that, Yukihito-kun smiled somewhat embarrassed.

His profile was so clear, that even I, as a man, was taken aback.

"I don't know if that's why it was, but when I saw Mitsurugi-san's dark face, I recalled myself from that time – though the nature of her

darkness was on a completely different scale from that of mine… That's why I could never talk to her. It was a very strange feeling when I learned that Mitsurugi-san of all people had an acquaintance who was a university student. Mitsurugi-san, who didn't even speak with people her own age, I wondered what kind of person she was acquainted with. At first, I was wary of this person, Nagito Yamada, who appeared in every step of Nee-san's conversation. I thought she was being tricked by some shady guy who had a thing for crazies."

"…Oi."

"I'm sorry. But I can now say that all my fears were unfounded. No, rather, it's reassuring to know that she still has her luck. No matter what happens to Yoishi Mitsurugi – there's one person who's ready to stand by her side."

I twiddled the ballpoint pen on my desk, at a loss for words, when—

"Hey, Yukihito. You came."

The door opened, and Krishna-san returned.

"Welcome back."

I moved to greet her when I noticed the kinagashi-wearing man I never wanted to see again appear behind her, making me scowl in disgust.

"Ah, we meet again."

A grin appeared on Sako Takita's blank face.

"Hey, what the hell are you doing here?"

"A fine greeting, really. I'm here simply because I was invited."

"Nagi-kun, just stop it. Takita-san just finished removing all the taboo words that remained in the school."

"Taboo words?"

"Anyway, please come in."

Accepting Krishna-san's invitation, Sako Takita entered the club room, crouching under the door to make room for his tall stature. Then, as soon as he sees Yukhito-kun, he greets him with a beaming smile.

"My name is Takita."

"I've known your name for quite a while. Thanks for taking care of Nee-san."

…Ahh, was this the adult way of dealing with things? I was a complete brat. I mean, Yukihito-kun was so mature despite only being in his first year of high school. I was squirming restlessly when —

"Here it is."

Sako Takita spoke as he took out several black books.

"I don't think there are anymore – but these are also 'Rororo'. There were four books."

"Ah, is that so?"

I didn't want to look at him anymore. I didn't even want to talk to him. That's because this guy himself was a fully-fledged user of taboo words. Before you'd even realized, he would be influencing you any way he wished. That's why, I deliberately turned my face away from him and started cleaning up the clubroom, which didn't actually need to be cleaned up in a hurry. However, Sako continued his lively explanation:

"I mean, it was a really tough job. We hired nearly 100 graduate students from the literature department for 20,000 yen a day, and we checked every book in the collection against the original text, letter by letter, every day and night since they closed down the library. it was an extremely hectic job -- I had to exorcise any student that got sick. But it was all worth it, I mean, we found four books. Moreover, all of them have been written exceedingly well. Indistinguishable from the originals at a glance, even to a specialist. Ayana Takamura really was quite ingenious."

…You bastard. Don't thoughtlessly praise a woman who is a corpse waxing in the place underground.

Disgusted, I felt something bitter in my mouth again, and I purposefully did my best not to look at him, when Krishna-san spoke:

“Anyway, with that – all the taboo words within the school and library have now been removed. No more negative thoughts will be focused on one place. Well, it may still take some time for it all to disperse.... but we’ve done all we could for now.”

“But you know, they’re scary.”

Sako muttered calmly, as if it were someone else’s problem.

“Young women really are scary. They think by themselves round and round and then go so far as to do it. Men always talk big and act half-hearted, a girl's tenacity is really something that shouldn’t be overlooked when it comes to getting things done.”

“Will this university, or should I say, this institute, be alright for now?”

Sako let out a relaxed chuckle in response to Krishna-san’s question.

“It’ll be fine. The stifling atmosphere that enshrouded this place for so long is no more. The structure is still the same, but that won't be a problem once some renovations are done, and I'll send the opinion letter on that, including all the bills, to the appropriate person at the institute. I’ll explain to them that if the clock tower is not completely renovated by next year, and some of the spiritual path-oriented structures are not renovated, I will forcibly deliver this book to their house.”

Terror filled me as Sako’s eyes seemed to flash red for an instant.

--I ended up asking him:

“Leaving aside the jokes, what are you planning to do with that book?”

Sako lovingly caressed the black book in response and smiled.

“This is a work of art. I’ll store it properly at home and sell it.”

“Sell it? You should burn that thing right away!”

“Oh, don’t be silly now. Poison might be poison, but it’s still useful at times. In some cases, it might even be a medicine. Like that bisque doll-like girl: Yoishi Mitsurugi-kun, she’s usually nothing more than a poison, but this time, she served as the best medicine possible for this institute.”

Those words silenced Krishna-san even more than me.

“--I get it.”

Krishna-san spoke with a sigh.

“In this case, I can say that she and Nagi-kun deserve the credit. If it wasn’t for them, it wouldn’t be possible to find and remove the Kotodama that person left behind.”

“So where is she? I'd like to see that beauty one more time if possible, before I go back to Aomori.”

“She’s not here.”

“I understand that – then where is she?”

In response to Sako’s inquiry, I looked at Yukihito-kun.

Yukihito-kun gave a small shrug.

“…As usual, she left early today without waiting for the fourth period. But, well, she did give a proper report today.”

She had been missing for two days.

And the fact that her shoes were found lined up on the roof next to the water tower.

All of these things were apparently disregarded when she showed up alive and well.

Well, to be precise, it was a little different. There was a proposal to

suspend Yoishi for a week for leaving school early and being absent without permission, but that seemed to only make her happy, so they decided to have her clean the classroom by herself for a week. Well, she still ended up leaving early today, so that plan was effectively squashed. I'm looking forward to seeing what kind of punishment her teachers come up with from now on.

“What? She’s not here. What a disappointment.”

Saying that, Sako quickly moved to leave.

“Are you going back?”

“Well, I’ve finished greeting everyone involved.”

I interrupted in the middle of the conversation between Sako and Krishna-san:

“Hey – what about Ayana Takamura? What’s going happen to that underground space from now on? It’ll be bad if you just leave it like that, right?”

Sako shrugged his shoulders in front of the doorway.

“There are no humans who can reach that place, and it probably won't be found again until the day this school is dismantled.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Who knows? There are no absolutes when it comes to the world beyond. I’m still a resident of this world, after all. At any rate, Ayana Takamura is already dead. That is unmistakably true. You, seeing her corpse in the underground space is testament to the fact. Perhaps that’s the reason why Yoishi-kun showed you her corpse. She was already dead. You need to accept that and live with it.”

Even if you tell me that –

I can’t forget that thing wriggling in the depths of the darkness. Just the thought of that thing in the underground of this school shatters the very foundation of my colorful campus life.

But thereupon – Sako let out a chuckle.

“Say, if someday the underground of this school was dug up - wouldn't that be a real sight to behold? Why would a dead high school girl from the 2000's be in the ruins of a bomb shelter that was supposedly buried right after the war? That would surely cause a huge commotion throughout Japan.”

“…”

…That would certainly be the case. I, too, would have been thrilled to see such a discovery without knowing the truth, and I’d be imagining all kinds of things every day.

Krishna-san gave a small smile.

“Well, wouldn’t that be a romance?”

It was a soft smile, as if something that possessed her had fallen away, and with those words, everyone in the club room looked at each other.

“That’s right.”

Sako grinned and stroked his thin beard as he spoke.

“It’s safe to say that Ayana Takamura is still inside all of you. As a simple memory that makes you tremble with fear.”

And with that, the asshole had the nerve to poke each of us in the chest, and that included Krishna-san’s ample bosom in the end. With a plop. And not just with his index finger, but with the palm of his hand, you son of a bitch.

“T-T-Ta—Takita-san!”

Sako laughed loudly at Krishna-san, who was blushing and jumping up and down.

“What a blessing for sore eyes—or rather, for my palms. Well then, excuse me.”

Laughing, he turned back in his blue dyed kimono—

And with the four black books in hand, Sako Takita happily trotted off.

For a while, I was still, glaring at the floor, but—

Before long, I got up from my chair, and rushed out into the corridor to chase after Sako.

And I shouted at the lanky figure receding from view.

“Oi, Sako!”

Sako stopped a few meters ahead of me.

In the middle of the concrete hallway, he slowly turns back, with his hands in his pockets.

I had no idea why I decided to ask that question to this guy, of all the people. It might not have been something I should ask Sako, whom I had thought I would never want to talk to again for the rest of my life. But—but, he was the only adult that was connected to the truth of this case.

“Sako, tell me one thing.”

“What is it?”

Trying not to be swallowed up by the incense-fueled atmosphere of Sako. I asked him:

“How does it feel… to be an adult?”

“An adult?”

“That’s right, an adult.”

An adult.

That was the last thing that popped in my head before that underground space disappeared.

Ayana Takamura didn't have anything like antisocial personality disorder – no, the very existence of widespread antisocial personality disorder in this world was questionable. It was like ghosts: wasn't it something that adult society had named as such while clinging to the so-called societal common sense? Wasn't it just putting a lid on things that weren't understood? – I had been unable to shake off those thoughts since then.

Of course, that wasn't in support of abnormal criminals. However, in this world, the purer a person was, the more likely he or she was to be beaten down and broken. And I guess Yoishi and I were similar in that respect. Disgust towards compromising. Resistance to admitting that what cannot be done cannot be done. If you say we are brats, that's all there is to it, but then what does it mean to be an adult? I couldn't settle all this without at least asking him, the only adult who was able to look at this series of incidents from a bird's eye view.

Sako looked at me with amusement for a while, before finally muttering just a few words.

"Being an adult… is nothing but pain."

"…"

"You see. Being an adult is understanding the gap between you and the world. You realize how little you have to do with the world. That's what life is all about, I guess."

If that's the case, then why the hell are you grinning all the time?

I was about to ask when Sako shrugged in a pompous way, and added:

"But I'm a total *masochist*."

"…Huh?"

"Masochism is the strongest, Nagito Yamada-kun. It goes much farther beyond than just being insensitive. It's the only quality that can turn this hopeless world into something to look forward to."

Sako Takita chuckled, gave me a small wave before walking off,

leaving me behind in shock.

I stared at his back for a while, before eventually realizing that I had been befuddled. Clicking my tongue, I spat out.

“As I thought, that guy really can’t be trusted.”

But at the same time, I was somewhat relieved that something ominous was going away.

That was, together with the departure of the incomprehensible man, the black books of taboo words Ayana Takamura had left behind. Those strange book that, if read, would amplify negative thoughts and rob one of oneself.

I breathed deeply, just knowing that it was without a doubt, no longer in my sphere of life.

That’s right, for the first time in a very long time, I was truly relieved.

○

However,

“That thing was an imitation.”

My relief didn’t even last a single day.

I was behind the library, and the speaker of those words was Yoishi Mitsurugi.

After leaving the club room, I suddenly remembered the pitiable memorial monument buried deep in the thick shrubbery, I put a sickle for weeding and work gloves in a bucket and headed to the memorial behind the library, where I found Yoishi already there. The weeds around the monument had been mostly pulled out, I thought to myself how admirable she was, and began helping her with the remaining weeds. That’s when I told her the whole story of what had

just transpired with Sako, to which she had simply replied in that way.

“An imitation? What do you mean?”

“The real ‘Rororo’ is something else.”

Her whisper made shivers run down my spine, and gave me goosebumps.

“…No, wait a minute. Isn’t it all over?”

“If she were that easy to deal with, then it would be no problem at all.”

With no change in her expression, Yoishi continued pulling out the weeds and placing them in the plastic bag.

She then stood up, took out a bottle of mineral water from her school bag, poured water on the monument, and clasped her hands together.

Panicked, I stood up straight away and clasped my hands together at the same time.

And after praying with all my heart that he may rest in peace – I asked her, once more.

“Then, what do you mean when you say that the real ‘Rororo’ is something else?”

Yoishi -- looks at me with a blank expression on her face, and questions me in reverse.

“Do you… really want to know?”

…Oh God.

Isn’t this the same pattern as always?

But this time, I really thought about it a lot. I was painfully reminded that I had my limits. That’s why, I shook my head so vigorously that it made a sound. No, I didn’t want to know.

However, Yoishi looked away from me, took a deep breath, and spoke in a whisper:

“No, this time, it might be better for you to know.”

She started walking by herself after saying such a tantalizing thing.

“H-hey, wait. What do you mean?”

“This was probably – a complete defeat for us.”

After heading out of the main gate, Yoishi said that.

“Defeat? Why? The clock tower is going to be renovated, and the school building as well. There are no more books in the library with taboo words. The underground space will remain closed. So why?”

Asked that question, Yoishi shifted her pale face slightly in my direction.

She placed her hand on her well-shaped chin and pondered for a while, before she finally began to speak quietly:

“I thought about it last night. That moment, you ended up looking back, and yet, why were we still able to leave the underground space?”

“You mean about that? About it being forbidden to look?”

“That’s right. And I realized that Ayana Takamura had not lost a single chess piece.”

Yoishi’s face looked pale, and also tinged with a blood color of excitement.

“After all, even if the taboo words were removed from the library, she still had her sister by blood, Takako Takamura as a vessel. And above all else, she had acquired two catalysts: you and I.”

“Ha--? Why am I a catalyst--?”

As I said that, I remembered.

That’s right, in the Rororo incident, didn’t Sako say he used me as a catalyst? But – just wait a second. What the hell even is a catalyst? I didn't hear anything about it. I don't remember being anything like that.

Yoishi clicked her tongue at me as if telling me: ‘I've told you many times, over and over again’, and declares:

“Whether they are living or deceased, you end up empathizing with anyone and anything. And that is the most convenient thing for a ghost.”

“…”

“For example – in the clock tower, in the cat mystery, and in the library late at night. Do you remember what you experienced in all those events? Does that fear still pulse inside you?”

“That's because… I mean it just happened recently.”

I nodded while trying to suppress the shivers I was feeling, when Yoishi thrust her index finger at me.

“For her, that’s ‘Rororo’.”

“—Huh?”

“The role the books she created with taboo words was, in short, a supernatural device that unconsciously embeds fear in people's hearts and lets their negative emotions run loose. But that could have been done with any ghost story that destabilizes people's minds. In other words, the fears we have experienced, the fears we may experience, **and the fears of all those who know of our experiences** -- Ayana Takamura has decided to make all of them into reading material.”

--Hey, did you notice?

All of a sudden, I thought I heard Ayana Takamura's voice in the wind. It was as if someone had touched me with a hand that had no body heat -- I felt a gaze which chilled me to the bone. The thing that was once Ayana Takamura was still there, deep underground in this institute. Something that could see ghosts, was an accomplished user of taboo words, and something that was joined together with an innumerable amount of malice. Was that thing going to continue to gaze at us from here on?

"W-why us? No, why do I have to go through that?"

"Perhaps because they thought that the most efficient way to ingest fear from this school was to watch us up close. Otherwise, we wouldn't be here in one piece. You would have been swallowed up by the darkness spreading behind me."

"…Oh-Oo-Ooi, what should we do? Can't we read scary stories anymore? Can't we go to haunted places anymore?"

I asked her in a tearful voice, yet Yoishi coldly shook her head in the negative.

"No, we will read them, and we will continue to explore the paranormal."

"…Huh?"

"After all, you chose to stand by my side at that time."

I felt the tips of my toes grow cold at that low whisper.

"From now on, Ayana Takamura will continue to turn our fears into reading material. She will consume that and grow. And she will wait… wait for the day our hearts become so thin and worn out, that they connect to the world beyond. "

"—Y-Yoishi."

As if to escape the eerie gaze that pours down from far up above in the sky –

I ask in a trembling voice. Even though I already knew the answer, I couldn't help but ask it out loud:

"How can you look so calm… when we've ended up in such a shitstorm?

Yoishi was about to walk away – when she looked back. She answered back as usual, as if nothing were wrong, in words I'd known all too well:

"Because, I feel no fear. There's nothing she can take from me. Rather, it's you who needs to be careful."

Seeing those dark eyes gleaming with joy—

I got teary-eyed, as expected.

I thought Yoishi's pale face resembled a monster that suddenly appearing in broad daylight.

Passing the main gate of the university, Yoishi went out to Itsukaichi Kaidō, and from there she went deeper and deeper into the residential area.

I followed her with a feeling of complete dread. Or rather, I didn't even want to follow her, but my house was this way, so there was nothing I could do.

I once again think of Yoishi's slender back that walks in front of me, as if she were carrying an invisible dead old woman.

--She, Ayana Takamura, and that bastard Sako, they're all twisted in some way. The place where I stand is absolutely different from them. I'm not prepared to laugh and talk about that kind situation.

All of a sudden, the fear I felt from that time came gushing back.

In the underground space where that strange darkness reigned, when I ran away holding Yoishi's hand.

There were definitely two people behind me. I can sort of understand it now – it was probably Yoishi and the consciousness of Ayana

Takamura mixed in together with Yoishi, right? I thought I had luckily only pulled up Yoishi from there – but, was that really Yoishi? Is the person here right now, really Yoishi Mitsurugi?

I tried asking Yoishi who continued to walk by herself in front of me.

“Say, Yoishi. Did you finally figure out what it is to be a friend?”

Yoishi stopped dead in her tracks.

For a few seconds, she remained frozen –

She turned around and stared at me somewhat embarrassed.

“You spent such a long time thinking while lost in that tedious maze, right? Did you figure out what it means to be someone’s friend?”

I tried to repeat my question again, but—

“…”

She turned away from me and increased her pace, walking even faster.

“H…hey, Yoishi.”

However—

I was convinced with the flicker of confusion in her eyes.

There was no doubt about it, it was Yoishi alright.

It was Yoishi Mitsurugi, the girl who spouted words like a denpa, who was lonely, and who felt no fear.

‘Having excessive self-esteem, and being self-centered. No remorse, no feelings of guilt, apathetic, and no empathy. They are talkative and friendly at first glance, but they cannot take responsibility for their actions, and lie to an abnormal extent.’

That definition clearly applied to Sako and Ayana Takamura, and, if you ask me, was not something that applied to Yoishi at all. In the first place, Yoishi’s not friendly in the least. Not at first glance, or any

other glance. And no matter the place or occasion, regardless of whether the atmosphere would be ruined or not, she speaks only the truth, and cannot tell a lie. That's why she gets into all kinds of trouble. And that's why – she was having so much trouble with a simple word like ‘friend’.

“I’m sorry. It’s alright. I’m sure you’ll understand the meaning of friend soon—"

I was midway through my speech trying hard not to laugh out loud, when I realized.

For some reason, I was near my apartment building.

“That’s why, it’s just for the time being, so…”

Yoishi abruptly turned to look back and spoke.

“I thought I’d start by getting to know you a little better.”

“…Huh?”

“Let’s split the rent and utilities 50-50.”

“…Wha?”

--W-wa…wait a second.

Without even giving me the time to say that out loud, Yoishi declared that as she stepped inside the hallway to my apartment. I had a bad feeling about this, so I hurried in after her.

I entered inside to see Karasu-san, who seemed to be there just to drop off some luggage.

“Oh! Yoishi-chan, long time no see.”

She called out to Yoishi, who ignored her without saying a word and continued towards the front of my room where she casually put her hand on the door handle. But the door was locked of course, and she couldn’t enter. Did I imagine hearing a small click of the tongue?

“H-hey, wait, wait, wait, Yoishi!”

I finally shouted out loud, pushing aside Karasu-san dressed in her black camisole and stole, and ran up to Yoishi.

“What the hell do you mean when you said to split the rent and utilities 50-50?!”

I asked, and for some reason Karasu-san answered instead of Yoishi with the same irresponsible, full-blown grin on her face.

“Well -- That’s how it usually is when it comes to living together.”

…L…Living together?

L-Living together means that, right? The thing hated most by parents in this world, where a man and a woman live under the same roof before getting married, the representation of an illicit sexual relationship. I mean, why? Why is this happening? I have no idea! It doesn't make any sense! Seriously, someone come here and explain it to me right now!

My heartful cry roared out into the world -- and at the same time, my brain vividly drew my father's astonished face, my sister's face bursting into laughter, and Krishna-san's fainting figure once more.

In the present, Yoishi just stood at my front door as she looked back.

Holding her school bag with both hands in front of her Koumei school skirt, she slicked her long black hair down, as if to hide her slightly stiffened face.

And then—

She spoke those words, which were absolutely wrong in their place of use, situation and everything else:

“I’m not much good at anything, so please take care of me.”

Afterword

As it appears, the story "Phenomeno" is a novel that relentlessly compels its writer to think about ‘death’. No, that comes naturally when depicting the ‘paranormal, and there is already a magnificent and well-known saying in this world: ‘Momento Mori.’

Having said that, the other day, I attended the funeral of an acquaintance of mine. Until that point, I had always thought of funerals as ceremonies to help give closure to the hearts of the bereaved, and that they were more for the sake of the living, than anything else. However, as I gazed at the image of the departed, I realized that a ceremony is necessary regardless of whether the deceased had religious beliefs or not. It’s the first time for anyone to die, and I thought for the first time that the departed might be thankful to have someone else clearly declare, "You are dead”. At a funeral, the most tearful part is when the coffin is carried out, when you are strongly reminded that this is goodbye, but that is when I tried to think of it as: "We’ll meet again, someday.”

I will surely die someday, and I don't know if there is such a thing as the afterlife, but saying this made me feel a little lighter, to imagine that someday I would be able to talk again with the ones who have departed before me. As if swearing that, I would do my best to live a life that I would someday be able to talk about without shame… Huh? So, funerals really are for the living, after all? Well, it seems my thinking is still lacking.

Now then, I really must thank Yoshitoshi Abe in particular this time. I would like to thank the professional illustrator for his great artistry, his favor, and an apology for drawing nearly 20 illustrations that were not commissioned. Even though Abe-san himself had decided not to use them, one in particular made me feel as if I had been violently struck. It showed the realistic suffering of the girl named ‘Ayana Takamura,’ which I had not yet seen. And it was also thanks

to my editor, Katsushi Ota-san, who decided that I should revise the whole story by adding ‘The Portrait of a Lily,’ to what was originally supposed to be finished in a single volume, and to make it a two-part volume instead. Once more, I have to say that it was a pleasure to work with both of you.

And to all who have read this far:

Thank you very much, once again. I’m sorry that no matter how hard I search, I can't find any other words that are worthy of this -- but here is a sky-full thank you.

March 2013

Ninomae Hajime

Afterword To the Afterword

…Naturally, I think having three afterwords in succession is a bit repetitive, but I was careless and forgot that there were already two before this one.[16]Having said that, I'm going to tell a pop ghost story.

In the university I attended, there was a strange rumor surrounding a certain school building. The story went that if you were to count the number of windows from outside the building, the number would be ◯◯, yet when entering and counting all the classroom windows from the inside, the number would turn out to be one short. As a test, I tried to count and confirm all the windows on the first floor with a friend of mine, but the number was the same. As we looked at the school building from the outside, I spoke disappointedly, “It's the same, isn't it?”, when my friend suddenly spoke.

“…That window on the second floor, isn’t it strange?”

I looked and saw that the window furthest to the left of the second floor had its curtains drawn.

I felt something of a shiver at that moment. Because after all, it was a school building with no curtains in any of the classrooms. The two of us tried going into the place where the curtained window was located. It was a classroom at the far end of the second floor, but again, there was no such window with its curtains drawn anywhere inside. So then, just where was the room with the curtains we saw from outside?

“I see.”

My friend suddenly whispered, and started walking towards the back of the room. They then put their ears against the wall, and started tapping.

“It’s here. It’s closed up by a wall, but the interior is hollow— in other words, there’s a room here.”

That really sent chills down my spine. Beyond the wall where my friend stood, was a narrow space with a single closed window. There was a hidden space in a place that until now, I -- and probably no other student – was completely unaware of. Why did such a strange thing exist? Or was there an entrance somewhere?

Even though there was warm sunshine in the lunch break, that room alone, however, had a cold air hanging about it.

“Ah, that’s a weight off my shoulders.”

However, my friend was satisfied as they left the classroom, and in a panic, I rushed after. I didn't feel as if the weight had been taken off my shoulders at all, and when I caught up to my friend outside, I asked them.

“Why? What was all that about?”

In response, my friend looked somewhat pale as they turned back and said:

“That was terrifying. There was something there. When I knocked, I heard something move inside.”

--Is how the story went, but I couldn't forget the fiery glitter in my friend's eyes. It became the model for ‘Yoishi’ in this series ‘Phenomeno’ long after that happened. It’s not a pop story at all, is it?

Now then, this volume has been endorsed by the actress Chiaki Kuriyama-san.

The first time I met Chiaki Kuriyama-san was during the photography of the ‘New Moon Reading Hall’, the first time I got to say hello

properly was in the recording studio during the reading. I remember that Kuriyama-san greeted us in a very friendly manner, as if she were a childhood friend, which instantly brightened up the occult setting (since the New Moon Reading Hall itself was a ghost story project). As someone who is usually confined to the keyboard by myself, I was dazzled by her greeting and envied her personality that she could brighten people's hearts so much.

Thank you very much for taking time out of your busy schedule to share your wonderful words with us.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

December 2015

Ninomae Hajime

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ Senior(at work or school) in japanese
2. ↑ The poster in question...https://www.fukkan.com/store/fk_item/item_file_name1/68321686/large/beksinskih1.jpg
3. ↑ https://www.japanpowered.com/folklore-and-urban-legends/the-spirit-of-the-willow-tree
4. ↑ One of the Japanese alphabets
5. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akashic_records
6. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kotodama
7. ↑ Ikaigabuchi, the name of the website she creates.
8. ↑ Japanese slang which means psychic receiver of signals. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Denpa A little derogatory which is why Nagi corrects himself here
9. ↑ Expression used here literally means: for rice cakes, (go to) the rice cake shop
10. ↑ Honorific for older sister
11. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicene_Creed
12. ↑ The word used here is 陰陽和合 [Inyouwagou] which literally refers to the harmony of yin and yang energies, but in this context has another meaning: a sexual union between a male and a female.
13. ↑ Referring to the Japanese phrase, 走馬灯のよう (like a revolving lantern), meaning to see your life flash before your eyes before you die.
14. ↑ https://www.amusingplanet.com/2017/01/rosalia-lombardo-mummy-that-blinks.html
15. ↑ Generation that received relaxed education. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yutori_education
16. ↑ Since the digital editions had volume 2 and 3 bundled together, both afterwords appear at the end